EASY EYE™ LARGER TYPE · NO-GLARE PAPER

LANCER BOOKS 73 705 60¢

The Vampire Cameo

In modern Transylvania, Rosalie encountered stark terror at the nightmare castle of Count Darkus

Dorothea Nile

Rosalie paled. Lady Darkus blanched. Even Count Darkus shuddered violently, trying to lash out at the men who held him down.

The leader of the mob that had invaded Castle Darkus held up two sharp-pointed wooden stakes. His face was cold and cruel in the torchlight. "These," he said hollowly, "will be driven into your black hearts. We have no room for vampires in this country."

Rosalie felt the chill of terror—for a wooden stake would kill her, too, just as well as it would kill a vampire. . . .

PUT PLEASURE IN YOUR READING
Larger type makes the difference
This Easy Eye Edition is set in large clear type—at least 30 percent larger than the usual paperback book. It is printed on scientifically tinted non-glare paper for better contrast and less eyestrain.

For Bela Lugosi, who gave life
to the legend, and Larry T. Shaw,
who is willing to add to it

The Vampire Cameo

Dorothea Nile

LANCER BOOKS
EASY EYE™
LANCER EDITIONS
NEW YORK

A LANCER BOOK • 1968

THE VAMPIRE CAMEO

Copyright © 1968 by Script Associates
All rights reserved
Printed in the U.S.A.

LANCER BOOKS, INC. • 1560 BROADWAY • NEW YORK, N.Y. 10036

CONTENTS

1	EPISTLE	7
2	COUNT DARKUS	10
3	SAINT OR SINNER?	19
4	THE CASTLE	33
5	THE LADY DARKUS	46
6	THE DUSK REVEALS	57
7	UNQUIET NIGHT	70
8	DEPARTURE	82
9	DEADLY JOURNEY	94
10	THE DARKER PEOPLE	110
11	MONDRO	123
12	LARKMORE SPEAKS	135
13	THE LAST BATTLE	147
14	THREE LOST GIRLS	159
15	A TALE OF TERROR	172
16	POSTSCRIPT	184

EPISTLE

April 30, 1899

My very dear Father Luigi,

It is so good to take pen in hand again to write you. I had written to you at an earlier date, meaning to post the letter from Salzburg, but events came so rapidly and changeably that I was unable to do so. In any event, a letter is truly inadequate to describe all that has happened here at Darkus Castle. That is rather a shameful admission for a tutor of the English language to make, but I don't know how else to put it. I don't think the powers of even Mr. Edgar Allan Poe could fully explain the dark terrors that engulfed Darkus Castle. Still I can see no alternative but to set the true facts down on paper, since I shall certainly not have the opportunity of seeing you at once.

I can only suppose that the terrible tragedy has found its way into the New York papers. What must you think? Knowing your charity and wise heart, I am confident that you have been patient in your judgments. Perhaps you have even offered prayers for me in the parish. If you have, thank you with all my heart. I have kept your inscribed copy of the Holy Bible at my side throughout, and I believe it has sustained and comforted me. Believe me, Father, the devil was abroad in the hills and valleys of this fine old countryside. For a time, I was quite certain he might even win out over intelligence, common sense, and the Christian way of life. Lucifer finds many willing followers, not only among the ignorant, but among the schooled, as well.

The true story of Darkus Castle is utterly fantastic and defies credulity; yet it happened. I was here and saw it all. I shall put down the facts as simply as possible, leaving all embellishments and elaboration to that lovely day when I once more set eyes upon you, which I trust will be soon.

There are many facts and ramifications of consequence in my story, but I shall not detail them all. I hope you will understand. There are some things best left unsaid, some nightmare thoughts of the mind that just will not bear recounting.

Was it not yourself who told me that from all

evil there must always emerge good? I am reminded of this because of the very nature of my thoughts and feelings. You have always been my friend and mentor. More than that, you are the father I never had and never knew.

Now I shall say no more, for I wish to post this letter to you immediately. The journal it will be attached to is the full record of what occurred during one week in March of this year. I can only hope it will convey all there is to tell of Darkus Castle and its strange, incredible master, Count Alexander Darkus.

I shall count the hours until I receive your reply and, I fervently hope, your understanding and blessing.

In all that I have been and am, I remain,

Your obedient servant,
Rosalie Lindquist

P.S.: Will you please keep the journal for me? I think it entirely fitting and proper that you, of all possible people, should be the keeper of this secret in my life!

COUNT DARKUS

Midnight on the Karlopian Pass has been likened by experienced travelers to a descent into a maelstrom. They say that but a second in such darkness seems like the end of the world. Perhaps it has always been so when the last light of day is gone and high, craggy tors and natural barriers of stone and forest blot out the horizons to the east and west. Too, when one is closed off in the gloomy confines of a coach and four, the world can also seem as narrow and lightless as a cardboard box.

Then there is only the fierce whicker of the horses, the cranking, springing music of the wheels, the intermittent lash of the spurring whip, and, possibly, the hoarse exhortations of a driver urging his leaders along.

Rosalie Lindquist knew that all these sights and

sounds would linger in her memory for the rest of her life. Her long-awaited sabbatical in Europe was drawing to a close. The breathless itinerary of medieval lands and countries, embracing Russia, Germany, Italy, Romania, and Yugoslavia, would come to a full halt in the foggy city of London. Then back by fast packet to America and the necessary life of schoolmistress, specializing in English and literature. For a young woman of twenty-four, the sabbatical had been a truly rewarding experience. There had been so much to see, so much of Life to drink in and savor.

Rosalie, orphaned in her formative years, had always known how to care for herself and stand on her own two feet. She had youth, vitality, and the confidence that comes with fine schooling. Poise, equanimity, and decorum were her very long suits. The one folly and hazardous foible of her makeup was a secret, passionate longing for adventure. For an *experience*. Midnight on the Karlopian Pass along the rocky way to the Austrian border seemed the most unlikely time and place to provide anything in the romance category. Danger, yes, for the rutted, ragged roads were treacherous, and there were everready gorges, draws, and ravines lining the route.

Her driver, a blocky, stout-shouldered man with

enormous hands and a gruff façade, had paradoxically instilled the greatest confidence in her. William Grieg had come well recommended by the Travel Bureau of Austria. He had ridden the Karlopian Pass and its environs for some thirty of his fifty-odd years. In thunder and in lightning. She had little to fear in his hands. The roadway was not made that his teamster skills could not master.

"Sit back," he had instructed her when they left the ramshackle inn at the very foot of the mountains. "The ride is not easy. The lady will have to learn to move with the wheels. That is the best way. Else you will have a bad back."

"Thank you, Mr. Grieg. I'm accustomed to carriages. All sorts. I've even ridden horseback in America. They have many fine riding stables there."

Mr. Grieg had not been impressed. He had grunted, squinted into the bloody ball of sunlight dipping beyond the Transylvanian Alps, and wiped his blocky hands gladly of his advice.

"You have never been on the Karlopian Pass. A devil's route. Boulders, crevices. Still it is the only way to reach the border. Heed me, lady. Ride with the wheels."

"Very well, Mr. Grieg. I'll do as you say, of course."

"Good. Now, get in. We go. I don't want to be

any closer to Darkus Castle than I have to be at midnight."

With that, he had not waited for the sudden question she was about to ask. Instead he had clambered aboard the platform of the pumpkin-shaped coach, gathering the thick, heavy reins in his hands, bellowing to his four mares to be quiet. Rosalie had obediently stepped into the interior, made herself comfortable, and settled down for the long ride.

It had struck her as excessively odd that the people at the inn, all of whom had been so kind and tolerant of a stranger in their midst, had now fallen silent, limiting themselves to slow waves of their hands. She remembered their eyes as being mute, compassionate, and almost tearful. This expression of concern, rather than alarming her unduly, recalled to her the gentle, sad face of Father Luigi. Yes, the good father, her mentor ever since the day she had embraced the Roman Catholic religion following the deaths of her beloved parents, had often looked at her exactly in the same fashion. It was a curiously disturbing feeling to have people look at you in such a manner. It so often suggested that they were aware of some danger that you in your innocent blindness were incapable of seeing.

There was no more time to dwell on eyes and

their meanings. Mr. Grieg swung his leather whip smartly and bellowed a command, and the heavy mares plunged forward, drawing the swaying coach like a feather in their wake.

The inn, the faces, the mood, and the bright ball of sun all vanished. Within rapid moments, the towering hills and sides of the Karlopian Pass lay before her. And the gathering darkness of the day. She could make out the awesome thrusts of the tors into the heavens. They were like some monolithic reminder of an ancient civilization. Stonehenge, perhaps, in gigantic bas-relief.

And then the rains came, bringing with them thunder and the sharp, incessant flashes of lightning. Cascades and torrents of water pounded the coach. Mr. Grieg, alone and desolate on his perch, became a hunched, cowering statue fighting the elements and his frightened horses. The coach swayed, bounced, and rebounded with every perilous dip of the roadway, every treacherous crack. Rosalie found herself fighting to maintain her equilibrium, concerned alternately about her physical well-being and the state of her two heavy wicker traveling trunks lashed to the rear of Mr. Grieg's coach.

It was a night to confound the heartiest soul, let alone a single young woman of modest means who had risked everything to take her sabbatical on the

Continent. There was nowhere to stop to seek temporary shelter and safety. The road stretched for twenty kilometers to the Austrian border, with the Pass winding and corkscrewing a spiral road toward a haven. The sudden storm had given no warning. In truth, at the hour of five, the skies had been blue and streaked with reddish trails of color. The sun had seldom seemed more brililant. But in a matter of darkness and a few hours, the world had transformed into a stormy sea of howling wind, thundering rain, and a maelstrom of violence.

Rosalie was frightened.

More frightened that she *was* terrified than of the storm itself. She who had longed for adventure and romance like any schoolgirl now found herself uncomfortably distressed at a mere inconvenience like foul weather! Of course, it was more than that. A bad rock, a sharp turn, a frightened horse—and Mr. Grieg's coach could very easily become a vehicle of death. That was not a very comforting notion either. Not with the wind whipping, the rain pounding, and the lightning illuminating the stark, nakedly cruel countryside. The high walls of the mountains rose like a shroud of stone on all sides. Rosalie had to fight a desire to keep her eyes tightly shut.

The sides of the coach pummeled her as her

light, trim figure, encased in its prim blue bonnet, flowing cape, and concealing skirts of turquoise lace, rocked mercilessly with each sudden swerve of the passage. Mr. Grieg had all he could do to keep the coach and four firmly on the right of way. The laboring horses were steaming for breath, crying out in protest.

There was no telling how long the frightful odyssey would take. Not with the weather as it was, not with the way so dark and frightful. Rosalie could not see through the glass sides of the coach windows. Only the blurred orange glow of Mr. Grieg's platform light shone in the darkness, bobbing like a buoy in a churning sea. The rainwater ran down, wavering, diffused, unchanging, unending. Rosalie's ears began to ache from the medley of night noises. The storm, the horses, the grind of the wheels, the blasting thunder. All the most pleasant thoughts of her journey so far, all the lovely sights she had seen in Europe—the Bavarian Alps, the gentle lakes like mirrors, the picturesque taverns and inns, the museums—all of them had fled into the darkness. An unreality of time and place. It was as if the entire universe was now a place of darkness and elemental fury.

Her first real indication that true, actual danger was about to unfold came with the high, fierce

shout of Mr. Grieg. It was more oath than speech, scream than shout. Then came the shrill bleats of the animals, to be immediately followed by a heart-stopping lurch of the coach. Then a short, hard snapping sound underscored with a grinding, fearsome grating noise. After that, all of which took but seconds to happen and a breath of time to experience, the world indeed took one more incredible spin into nightmare.

She felt herself lifted, flung. Like some Raggedy Ann doll about to be consigned to the oblivion reserved for all toys that have lost their usefulness.

The walls of the coach tilted, careened, and then came back upon her, closing her in, crushing her. She felt her senses take wing, all lost in a fuzzy, roaring blur of sight and sound. There came a tremendous resurgence of nondirectional motion. Horses screamed, doors shot open, metal and wood telescoped with terrifying violence, and the rainwater suddenly found her, drenching her, drowning her in torrents of liquid.

She tried to scream. She couldn't.

The maelstrom had engulfed her.

She passed into unconsciousness for the very first time in her life, falling like a child into a territory of unknown, uncharted blackness.

Mr. Grieg, the coach, the horses, the storm, and

the Karlopian Pass all vanished into the shadows. Receding, disappearing, going away. Off into the night. Blotted out in the twinkling of an eye.

The night conquered all.

It was a sensation that had to be akin to dying.

SAINT OR SINNER?

There was a man in her nightmare. A strange man. The strangest individual she had ever seen.

He was tall, cloaked, and extraordinarily handsome. A lofty beaver hat, all black and unremittingly rigid, crowned his head. The height of this amazing man seemed to stretch toward infinity. When he raised both arms, she could see that a long, pointed cane, whose ferrule was of hammered silver that reflected the flashes of lightning in the night sky, sparkled like a star.

Behind the man stood the grim, eccentric outline of a phaeton as black as his beaver hat. Patient black horses, a pair of striking animals, stood patiently, eyes upon the damp earth. She had the feeling that if the man spoke to them they would respond as obediently and quickly as any house-

hold pets. There was another man on the platform of the phaeton. Even sitting, a riding whip poking from his gloved hand, he would be an incredibly tall man, perhaps taller than his obvious master. The face was long, cadaverous and mute. She saw an expression as stolid and enduring as the rocky tors that bordered the Pass.

And the rain beat down, shimmering, magical, lending that unreal other-world aura to all that she saw and did not understand. Was it a dream? Nightmare, indeed?

Where was her own coach and Mr. Grieg? Where, in fact, was she? Why did she feel so light, so airy, disembodied as it were? There was no feeling of pain or anxiety—as there should have been. Surely, Mr. Grieg's coach and four had had a very severe accident on the treacherous roadway.

The dark world held but herself and this strange man and his yet stranger phaeton and mute driver with the horses at the ready. The noise of the wind and rain was curiously muffled as if the tempest were taking place at a distance far off from where she stood.

"Can you stand?"

The stranger's voice cut across the fog of her senses like a smooth, insidious whip, striking evenly, laying open the maze of her distorted

reflexes. The barest trace of accent gilded the words, suggesting that perhaps English was not his mother tongue.

"Yes—I think so. . . ."

"You are confused," the stranger continued. "And rightly so, in this beastly weather. Permit me."

Dazed, she saw him draw nearer. As in a dream, or nightmare, he loomed large and batlike. The folds of his dark Inverness seemed to flutter before her. The beaver-crowned head inclined toward her. She caught the majestic glint of commanding eyes, a firmly chiseled nose, and an utterly impeccable mouth. Long sideburns, as black as ink, extended from his temples to nearly the line of his strong jaws. The silver-tipped cane poked at her. She recoiled.

His light laughter rippled, louder than any sound of the muted, retreating storm.

"You misunderstand, my dear lady. Take my cane. You will need it to support yourself. You have had a rather nasty spill. But consider yourself fortunate. You will heal. Others will not."

She shook her head, unable to comprehend, unable to feel. It was all so amazing. She felt nothing. Just buoyant and light-headed. There was not a single tingle of sensation in her body. The

dreamy aspects of the moment completely absorbed her. Again she shook her head, more violently than before.

"Won't you take the cane? I would offer you my arm, but even this chance mishap will not dissolve my inherent protocol in social matters. Darkus cannot allow himself liberties."

Darkus? Darkus. Where had she heard that strange name before?

"My carriage . . ." she faltered. "Mr. Grieg. The storm. I . . ."

"An axle snapped. The coach is down there in the ravine. Some miracle must have thrown you clear in time. If you are a Christian woman, and I assume you are, thank your Maker. You have been spared in a manner befitting the Old Testament and its incredible works."

"Oh . . ." She felt herself swaying. She flung out an arm, her hands closing about the long silver-tipped cane. And still, the world was a muffled, muted place.

"Come," he commanded again in that powerful voice. "Walk to the parapet of the road. See for yourself."

The nightmare continued. Urged on by the voice with its hypnotic power and the gentle but forceful pull of the cane whose other end he held, she stumbled on the wet earth as he directed. She

was conscious too of the shadowy phaeton poised behind her like some great lurking beast. The silent, staring giant of a driver continued to sit as still as stone. Thunder rumbled faintly in the distance, a quiescent tumult fading away.

The lashing rain had abated too. Now a fine mist hung before her eyes. She stared down into the darkness of the ravine. The way was precipitous, spiked with boulders and jutting ledges. Foliage and undergrowth spilled haphazardly down the slope. She did not have to look far.

The coach, now a smashed and cruelly battered pumpkin, was lying askew on one side. There was no sign of the horses or the driver.

It would have been impossible to voyage down to see if Mr. Grieg were trapped in the wreck. The route was nearly sheer and inaccessible. The distance was a full two hundred yards into the heart of the ravine.

"Mr. Grieg!" she heard herself blurt. "The poor horses! . . ."

The voice at her elbow now held some rich, inner amusement. The laughter stung her, filled her ears with reproach.

"Ah, yes. Mr. Grieg. I knew him well. A Bible reader of high order. He slept with wolfbane and garlic strung about his front door. I am afraid he would be quite dead, my dear lady. Not even the

Creator allows miracles for a crash such as that one. As for the horses, there is evidence that the yoke broke in time to allow them the freedom to run away. I suspect they are still racing toward the Austrian border now that they are free of the encumbrance of a heavy coach."

Rosalie Lindquist's orderly brain reeled.

This wasn't happening, this couldn't be happening. She was having a weird nightmare, and this tall gentleman with his dark clothes and dark look was but a figment of her overtired imagination. Frantically, she turned around, looking for the phaeton, expecting it not to be there. Yet it was, mocking her with its shadowy silhouette, its patiently waiting driver.

"Who . . . ?" she asked, trembling, looking up at her midnight rescuer. "Who are you?"

The black beaver hat was doffed. Sleek black hair, tapering to those grotesquely long sideburns, gleamed in the gloom. "I am Darkus, of course. Count Alexander Darkus, dear lady. Since Providence has literally flung you into my arms, I shall do all in my power to salvage your pride and position. You shall come to Darkus Castle as my guest."

She shrank from him, though she couldn't have said why. His tall, aristocratic figure seemed to cast a shadow over her. She saw the gleam of eyes

that burned like bright embers in a dying fire. She released her hold on the expensive walking stick.

"No, no," she murmured, her heart in her mouth. "I couldn't. I'm . . ."

Count Alexander Darkus flung back his head and laughed. It was a faintly outraged laugh.

"So. You, too. A complete stranger to these parts. And yet the name Darkus strikes terror in your heart." The laugh stopped, and he took a step forward. To Rosalie it was a menacing gesture, but there was no place to run. The abyss of the ravine yawned behind her.

"I . . . don't know you," she quavered. "You are kind to offer me a refuge, but I'm so confused. This has all happened so suddenly. I feel almost as if I am having a terrible dream—"

"And so you are," he agreed with abrupt softness. She thought there was a note of pity in his resonant voice. "Come, now. Desist no more. Mondro, my driver, may be a mute and utterly incapable of conversation, but he is quite the finest driver on the Continent. There will be no repetition of your sad accident. I give you my word on that despite the truth that these rains do tend to make the roads and byways back to Darkus Castle a veritable morass of hazards. Come, I say. You are drenched to the skin, and we have warm fires and red wine and strong meat. I would suggest you

require all three before you are quite yourself again."

A jagged streak of lightning lit up the sky. The ensuing boom of thunder reverberated in the hollows of the numberless darkened hills. She trembled. She had never for a moment given thought to her condition, but now that he had remarked upon it, she could feel the raw, biting teeth of the winds sweeping up from the Pass.

"You are kind," she faltered. "Yes—I will come with you."

"Done, then. And you, dear lady, how are you called?"

"Rosalie Lindquist. I am an American."

"Yes, of course. I would have thought that. Your clothes are not of Transylvania, and I venture to say you are wearing the latest in New World fashions. I have seen a dress such as yours in the catalogs."

She laughed, suddenly finding the entire deplorable situation somehow ironic. Wet to the bone, her coachman perhaps dead, her journey fatally interrupted, her lot cast with this fearful man—and he was blithely discussing her raiment as if they had chanced to meet in Central Park on a summer afternoon.

"Yes," she admitted. "I found the pattern in

Godey's—that is an American magazine. I managed to sew the dress myself."

"Charming. My compliments. Turquoise suits your honey-blonde hair. And now, since we have been properly introduced, please take my arm. I shall assist you into the phaeton."

Almost dumbly, she obeyed him. His voice, his every gesture was rich with command and simple acceptance of the fact that it was his right to have things done as he suggested.

She felt small and helpless beside him. His somehow enormous height and bearing were overpowering. She imagined herself a prisoner of sorts, since she hadn't the courage to refuse him.

"Mondro!" Count Alexander Darkus thundered abruptly, his voice shaming the thunder and the lightning. "Darkus Castle!"

Mondro nodded and raised his whip, and the horses obediently trotted forward, swinging around to face the opposite direction. Rosalie allowed the Count to hand her into the interior of the phaeton. In a moment, he had joined her, seating himself deftly at her side, his hands folded above the head of the silver-tipped cane.

The nightmare quality of the moment had not gone.

She found herself strangely unable to coordinate

her thoughts. Things had come to a pretty pass indeed. Her luggage was lost, her money, her valuables—the dress she wore was a ruin—and Fate had not been kind in the matter of arranging the outcome of her problems. This strange man, Count Darkus—who was to say what sort of man he was, what his intentions were?

Darkus Castle!

With a sudden chill, she now remembered William Grieg's curious remark before departure from the inn. Something about not caring to be in the vicinity of Darkus Castle at midnight . . .

The phaeton had lunged forward, timed with a sharp crack of Mondro's whip. Now Rosalie was completely frightened and demoralized. The delayed shock of the accident and a pure realization of the closeness of her brush with death set her to trembling. Her slender body vibrated as if she had been overcome with the ague.

Wordlessly, Count Darkus reached to the floor and brought forth a marvelously luxurious and warming Afghan, which he quickly and carefully spread over her lap, tucking the heavy folds about her shaking knees.

"It is but five kilometers to Darkus," he said evenly. "You will not be uncomfortable for more than another half hour. Be content, the worst of your ordeal is over."

"I can't thank you enough."

His profile was to her. She stole a look, amazed once more at his incredible handsomeness and unreal classicism of appearance. He was like someone she had seen in the museums and art centers of Europe. The beaver hat, the Inverness, the cane—all seemed as integral parts of his personality, as if he had been born wearing them. She flushed guiltily. She had met gentlemen before, many of them, but no on had ever struck her with the magnitude of Count Alexander Darkus. She felt like a commoner privileged to ride with a king. The man exuded royalty and sovereignty of birth. It wasn't just a title "Count," no. Darkus was to the manor born.

She didn't know what to say to him and yet she couldn't stay silent too long in his company. There was a magnetism about him that drew forth one's thoughts and words.

"You . . . knew Mr. Grieg? You said back there . . ."

"Yes," he said slowly. "Once, long ago, I stopped in his village to water my horses. He accosted me, calling down the wrath of the saints upon my head. I didn't understand. I had never had any dealings with him, and yet he called me his enemy. One doesn't forget an enemy, Miss Lindquist. It is al-

ways best to remember those you find will do you harm. Still, I regret his death."

"The poor man. I do hope he had no family. I can't bear to think of children deprived of a parent."

"Children survive," Count Darkus said, "no matter what happens in this mockery we call life. You will learn that, as I did, as time goes on."

She shook her head. "But why should a nice gentleman like Mr. Grieg slander you if you had given him no cause?"

Count Alexander Darkus turned at that, his compelling eyes fixed on her face. The slightest smile touched his perfect mouth.

"The devil can be hated even by those who have not the barest association with him," he said enigmatically. He turned away again, staring at the front wall of the phaeton as if studying its velveteen plushness. But his face held all the menace of a bird of prey.

Rosalie shuddered. Such a strange remark to make!

Yet all unconsciously her shaking fingers had stolen to the hammered silver crucifix pinned to her bodice. A gift from Father Luigi in the long ago. The thick sides of the cross were comforting.

She fingered it all through that dark, mysterious

ride to Darkus Castle with the horses lurching, the phaeton gliding like a ghost over the perilously dark and jagged roadway. Count Alexander Darkus had lasped into a deep silence, staring rigidly to the front.

He seemed alone with his own thoughts and dreams and desires.

And Rosalie Lindquist had just begun to remember with a savage shock to her senses that the Karlopian Pass and the Transylvanian Alps were buried in the very heart of that particular region which had given birth and credence to one of the oldest terrors in folklore.

Vampires.

The undead. The ghouls who slept by day and prowled by night, who caught their unsuspecting victims and bit their necks and sucked their life's blood. *Vampires!*

Foul beings who cast no reflections in the mirror, who quailed at the sight of the cross, who slept in coffins underground that was filled with the native soil of their homeland. Yes, yes. This was the land of vampires—and the only defenses against them were God, the Cross, and wolfbane and garlic hung about the neck or placed at the front door of your home.

And this Count Darkus—if ever a man might

look like one of those accursed people, he surely did!

Rosalie, all unconsciously, murmured a silent prayer in her mind that she was wrong.

THE CASTLE

Darkus Castle proved to be something Rosalie Lindquist had never seen before, a phenomenon she could never have imagined. Versed as she was in all the great tales and novels of the libraries of learning, she had never quite envisioned a structure like the domicile and retreat of Count Alexander Darkus.

The darkness of the night and the pitch-black aura made complete examination an impossibility. Yet even the solidarity of lighlessness could not completely hide the grotesquery of the monolith before her.

Mondro, the Count's giant driver and servant, had turned the phaeton so that its wheels now clattered hollowly on flagstones and cobbles. The horses had slowed, snorting fiercely from the wild, punishing drive. The phaeton halted, rocking on

its springs. Count Darkus murmured in his throat. Rosalie braced herself, her mind still embracing the multiple mysteries of Darkus Castle.

The view of it from the plunging descent of the phaeton down a perilous twisting ribbon of road had not been spiritually brightening.

The castle seemed to be an immense collection of Gothic towers climbing to a smoke-hazed sky. Lichen-covered walls and oily-dewed stones suggested incredible age and wear. Erosion had afflicted the cornices and dormers of ground-level windows and apertures. High, tapering arch doorways, grim and cathedral-like, loomed at random points of architecture. The entire aspect of Darkus Castle was feudal, baronial and heavily ornate, despite the passage of time and the damaging marks of centuries of rain, wind, and storm. The edifice was placed at the very bottom of a seeming abyss, surrounded by a forest of tall, dark trees. It was impossible to say what lay beyond the building. Great dark shadows engulfed the castle. This lent an atmosphere of the unknown and inexplicable that was most demoralizing. With her mind already vaguely filled with the fearful suspicions of old-wives' tales of vampires and evil, Rosalie found herself in a complete state of dread and uneasy heart.

Still, it was all so foolish, so silly—*there was no*

such thing as a vampire. There couldn't be. There mustn't be. It was against all the laws of science and—God himself.

"We have arrived," Count Darkus said in a clipped voice. "In a few moments you will forget all the discomforts of the night. Darkus is in a state of disrepair—we have no servants, you see—but we do keep up the rooms that we require for our needs. Come, Miss Lindquist."

Again his voice bespoke command. Again she followed, stilling her trembling, trying to forget the cold clasp of fear on her body. Her wet garments did not help.

Standing on the wet flagstones, the castle towering before her, she felt alien and remote, as helpless as any child. The tall figure of the Count, the beaver hat a symbol of authority, cowed her. The silver-tipped cane gestured in the gloom. Mondro, at the sign, bowed his head and wheeled the phaeton slowly away. The wheels clattered, the springs squeaked, the horses neighed. Soon, the darkness of the pit beyond the castle swallowed Mondro, the phaeton, and the horses. Even the sound of their passage seemed to vanish.

"You may take my arm if you will. The steps are broken in some places. But do not fear. I know the way."

"You've been so kind, Count Darkus." It wasn't

what she really wanted to say. But protests and expressions of her anxiety were beyond her.

His strong fingers found her arm. She imagined he smiled in the gloom. It was difficult to tell. The curled crown of the beaver hat masked his face.

They ascended a wide, curving staircase of stone whose low parapet was flanked by a stream of gently flowing water. Rosalie strained to hear the gurgle but could not. The last vestiges of the storm had rumbled off into the distance. The jagged horizon of mountainous ridges lifted starkly against the night sky.

All this land seemed to be like that. Everything that was natural and not made by man held some threat of violence and imminent doom.

For Rosalie, the most welcome things in the world at that moment would be a blazing fire, candlelight, and perhaps a cup of steaming tea.

The heavy doors facing her held a copper plate fashioned as a war shield, studded with spikes and nipples of metal. The design resembled a wolf's head with distented jaws against a field of fleur-de-lis. The motto, couched in Latin, was well nigh indistinguishable. The weather and lack of maintenance had worn the lettering to a blur.

The Count drew the portals wide with both hands, stepping aside to let her pass. A wide, baronial hall was dimly visible through the exigency

of a thick taper melting away in a seemingly charred sconce. The flame laid a pale, lambent lighting over the appurtenances of the feudal system. A suit of armor with halberd poised, oval portraits, tremendously tall urns and vases of exotic Eastern design and a faded length of rug disappearing into the yawning entrance of some other room. Yet thick cobwebs and ancient dust lay over everything. The candlelight lent an eerie aura of occultism to the scene.

"Let me have your things," Count Darkus suggested. "There is only Mondro here to serve me. The rest of my faithful retainers left a long time ago. Just as well, I think. I had no use for them. The castle is too extensive to be used in its entirety."

It was easy to believe that. The Count's words seemed to echo endlessly, the tones tripping off into the darkness beyond the hallway. Rosalie, numbed, allowed the Count to take her now limp bonnet and wrinkled cape. Her hands fluttered to her hair self-consciously, toyed with her crucifix all unwillingly. She imagined he was smiling again. But there was no more time to think. He had taken her by the elbow and was propelling her gently toward the wide threshold of the next room.

"You will find the study more to your liking. Mondro keeps the fire burning all day. The room is

quite pleasant. If you have a taste for books and paintings—and will not look too unkindly on the acquisitions of the hunt."

Puzzled by this, she soon found no need for further explanation. He had led her into the very heart of the room he called the study. Whatever Darkus Castle appeared to be from without, this interior was calculated to instill wonder and disbelief.

"Lord," she breathed fervently, despite an effort to match the sophistication of her strange host, "but this is . . . superb."

And indeed it was.

The fireplace, massive and brick-walled to a hearth of kingly proportions, blazed so brightly that any candle would have been sacreligious. Great tongues and forks of flame burned merrily, sending a spiraling firelight over the confines of the study.

Study—it seemed more the baronial hall. The walls were stone and wood of such a high sheen and polish as to be almost blinding. Mahogany or teak at the very least, which in turn added a splendor of mounting to the more than twenty framed paintings cleverly arranged on the vaulted walls. They inclined toward an apex of ceiling that was but a criss-crossing of sturdy oaken beams, as finely arranged as any brace of arch swords.

The paintings were thoroughly familiar to Rosalie. She had seen each of them many times in her career. The *Mona Lisa,* the *Transfiguration, The Last Supper,* El Greco's view of Toledo—and a host more. She felt a sudden release from fear and uncertainty. It spoke well for Count Darkus that his collection of artwork should include some of the world's most sacred scenes. Truly, what vampire would have permitted himself to be surrounded by that which would destroy all profane things?

"My, these are lovely—are you so interested in paintings, Count Darkus, or is it the painters themselves?" She had almost completely lost her hesitancy now. The study's atmosphere, so churchlike, had restored her Christian soul. As Father Luigi had said so many times, "The church is more than a place of prayer. It is a sanctuary against the forces of evil."

Count Darkus paused where he was. He had moved to a sideboard whose polished top bristled with bottles, decanters, and glasses. In the very act of selecting a bottle, he stared at her. Now that he was divested of his cape and hat, she saw the faded splendor of his clothes. The swallow-tail coat of dark serge was worn and shiny. The edges of his cuffs and shirt collar were wilted. The purple cravat at his throat was bravely affecting a swirl no longer natural to the fine silken material. But his

amazing head, so strikingly gentlemanly and attractive, had lost none of its dazzling effect on her senses. If this man lived alone here and she had to spend the night in his company . . . She did not pursue the thought, acutely aware that her senses were fluttering. She was no longer cold. The study with its blaze of fire and great oils on canvas had had an immediate salutary effect on her heart and soul.

"Yes, Miss Lindquist," the Count said slowly. "Great works of art interest me. I find it gratifying that there are men in this world who find suitable occupation for their minds and hands. But come. A drink, now? Brandy? Port? Or is it proper to offer you some tea? I am prepared to feed you. We dine late here, and fortunately supper is but a few minutes away. Mondro is making ready now."

"Yes. A bit of port, thank you. It might do me good. I need a bracer, I think." Late! The hour was well past midnight.

"Splendid." He lifted a bottle, pouring into a thin-necked goblet. "The canvases are but reproductions, of course. Still, they are rather good ones, don't you think?"

"Oh—they are excellent. I should have been hard put to contradict you had you said otherwise."

He stalked to her, glass extended. His boots clicked on the floorboards. His movements were deft, amazingly graceful. Rosalie took the glass. "Aren't you going to join me, Count?"

"No, dear lady. I do not drink."

At this strange remark, for which he offered no further explanation, Rosalie meekly sipped her port. It tasted fine. Warming and good. She felt an immediate lightness of spirit. The dampness and portentous gloom of the night were all but gone. It was even difficult to remember that she had been involved in an accident that must have claimed the life of Mr. William Grieg.

"You do not remark upon the other furnishings of the room, Miss Lindquist. Perhaps you disapprove and would rather say nothing?"

He had gestured toward the far walls, indicating the adornments on view there. These were many implements of the hunt. Spears, crossbows, fowling pieces, and as heterogeneous a collection of other weapons as Rosalie had ever seen. She shook her head in wonder, denying his statement, even taking pains to point out the majesty of a stuffed boar's head, tusks exposed, jutting from a handsomely mounted trophy rack.

And though all these articles were side by side with the marvelous paintings, the tenor of the

study was somehow unaffected. One had the feeling of museums and culture and acquired wisdom and experience.

"No, no. I think they are quite impressive."

He shrugged, still standing, and folded his arms. He stared at her intently. "The Darkus line is noted in these parts for its devotion to the pursuit of wild game."

"That," she said lamely, "must be very dangerous."

"Yes, I suppose so. Still, there is a great thrill in it. A *joie de vivre,* as the French would have it. Have you ever hunted, Miss Lindquist?"

She managed to laugh, emboldened by the warming drink. "Nothing larger than a turtle when I was a child. We found it a great lark to run after them and watch them try to get away. They moved so slowly, you know."

"At the risk of being impertinent, there is no comparison, dear lady. Turtles are for children."

"Of course." She decided to change the subject, as he seemed to have fallen into a deep and sudden melancholy. It was his eyes, she thought—he had the most expressively sad eyes. . .

"Count Darkus," she said, trying to smile but unable to. His demeanor didn't permit anything that might be taken for levity. "I can't express my gratitude for all you have done. You have saved

my life, such as it is. I'm sure of that. I can just imagine myself standing out there on the Karlobian Pass, alone in the dead of the night, the carriage gone. As well as my clothes. Indeed, I am without funds. But in the morning I should be glad to take my leave if you can arrange it. Perhaps Mondro could take me to the nearest town and I would be able to wire my friends for funds. I can't see myself imposing on your good graces for longer than overnight. I hope you won't think me ungrateful, but I am a schoolmistress in America. I was on my sabbatical, and it ends officially on the twenty-ninth of this month. So you see, I am bound by conditions of time. I hope you will understand."

The Count shook himself as if her words had awakened him from a reverie. He nodded.

"Yes, yes Tomorrow I will arrange everything. Your clothes and funds are no problem. We have many ladies' garments here, and you would be welcome to them. As for funds, you will allow me to provide you with some money. No, don't quarrel with me on the matter. It is little enough reward for me—to play the good Samaritan is a new role for Darkus. I deem it enjoyable, in truth. Now we will say no more about it. Suppertime is at hand. I should be pleased if you would join us at the table in the great hall."

Rosalie frowned. She had taken his plural nouns

as so much indication of his foreign background and education. But now, he had stressed the word *us* so personally and pointedly that she was unable to restrain herself from echoing the word.

"Us?" she repeated. "Surely you live alone here. . . ."

Count Darkus smiled. His sorrowful eyes twinkled in a cold, unamused smile.

"Forgive me. I should have mentioned it earlier. The Lady Darkus will be joining us for dinner. My dear wife—Carmela."

"Then I do intrude." Rosalie rose to her feet, not knowing what to do with her now empty port glass. "What must Lady Darkus think? That you should come home with a bedraggled stranger in the dead of night . . .

"Remain where you are," Count Darkus said with that command in his voice which brooked no denial. "The Lady Darkus has great sympathy for damsels in distress. As you will see. Now if you would like another port, do say so. If not, come with me to the main hall. Mondro will be just about ready to ring the bell."

It was uncanny.

He had hardly finished his statement before the faint, silvery notes of a bell tinkled from somewhere beyond the study. The notes were a lovely sound in such a pleasant room.

"Very well." Rosalie surrendered once more, powerless to do otherwise. "I should like very much to meet the Lady Darkus."

"And so you shall. She is quite a remarkable woman."

Rosalie could not see how any woman who was married to the incredible Count Alexander Darkus would fail to be otherwise.

The mistress of Darkus Castle, with all its fantasies and wonders, would demand someone kingly and surpassingly regal to sit on the throne of command.

It could be no other way. Such a household could not suffer an Alice-Sit-by-the-Fire or a gushing schoolgirl for a mistress.

Feeling less bright than ever and altogether conscious now of her drabness and churchmouse façade, Rosalie followed Count Darkus as he stalked from the study. His tall, commanding figure was more domineering than ever. The firelight threw his lofty shadow across the walls lined with paintings and trophies of the hunt.

The Karlopian Pass and its weird adventure now seemed like something that had taken place in another time, another world.

Darkus Castle was a universe unto itself—a unique domain where the supper hour seemed to be the most ungodly time of all.

THE LADY DARKUS

There was a long, carved oaken table in the center of the great hall of Darkus Castle. A high vaulted ceiling, limitlessly dark thanks to the vastness of the room, reached into the infinity of the imagination. The stone floor, unboarded and glistening with dampness, afforded no sense of comfort. Shadowy niches and apertures on all sides of the room permitted the night to enter. As there was no sky, the gloom was more unfathomable than ever. Mondro had set an enormous silver candelabrum as the centerpiece on the oaken table. From this lofty, impressive foundation, ten tall, thick yellow tapers glowed steadily. These cast an unwavering illumination, untouched by any vagrant wind. Rosalie Lindquist experienced a sensation of remoteness in this chamber, a cutting off of herself and the outside world. It was quite as if the room

were an island in a dream. Unchartered, alien, and distantly removed from reality.

The Count had suggested that she might wish to change her clothes, but her wardrobe was gone and she had not yet made the acquaintance of the Lady Darkus, Rosalie had chosen to wait.

Her attire, as wrinkled as it was from exposure to the raw weather of the Karlopian, had thoroughly dried, and she no longer felt clammy and cold. The warming fire in the study had had its salutory effect on her. In fact, she felt exquisitely euphoric and very nearly drowsy. Not even the gloom and foreboding of the main hall, so barren and empty in contrast to the well-furnished and upholstered study, could offset her feeling of well-being. If the Count chose to live amid such contrasts, it was perhaps indicative of a nature and personality that was truly Old World in origin and by design. Too, it was possibly all too true that Darkus Castle had fallen upon hard times. Only Mondro to retain and maintain such roomy environs . . .

No, she did not mind the emptiness and cheerlessness of the hall too much. The oaken table was large and laid with provender on white china plates, and the blazing candelabrum tended to offset much of the darkness.

Count Darkus gestured her to a high-backed

carved oak chair. There were some six of these set about the oval table. But there was no sign of the Lady Darkus.

"What an unusual room." Rosalie allowed herself the social fabrication as she sat delicately in the enormous chair. It was lined and mounted with the same harsh red velveteen cushions whose color and texture had dominated the upholstery of the study.

"A battle hall in reality," Count said tonelessly as he parted his swallow tails deftly and seated himself. Rosalie was immediately aware of the large, glittering signet ring on the third finger of his left hand. In the manner of imprisoned sunlight, it caught the gleam of the tapers and held it. "The Darkus family line is an extensive one, dating back to the Middle Ages. Legend has it that a good deal of my historic ancestry perished within these very walls. To escape the black plague that swept all Europe toward a communal grave, the Darkus men held seige here with their women and children against the pestilence. To no valiant purpose. In the end, nearly all died."

"A battle hall," Rosalie murmured. "How very interesting. I can imagine the great scenes that took place here. Knights and heralds, great ladies in those beautiful costumes—the plague. How terrible that must have been."

The Count's gleaming eyes regarded her soberly for an instant. "Yes, terrible. But not so terrible as the dark thoughts and useless sorcery that dominated those times. Ah." He suddenly peered toward the shadowy threshold of the room. "Forgive me. My wife seems to be tardy. But we can begin without her. There is an excellent soup in the tureen there. Peas and rice. Then you shall taste the superb venison. Mondro's a fine huntsman and provides my poor board as best he can."

"It all looks so good—I'm sure it will taste equally good."

Rosalie lowered her eyes, finding herself again unable to return the Count's gaze directly. His eyes had that incredible aspect of seeming to see through her slightest thought and notion. But of course, such an idea was ridiculous—a product of the wild night and her almost calamitous experience. She was still quite incapable of properly assessing the true importance of what had happened on the Karlopian Pass.

Now, the last echoes of the storm had abated. That gentle, rustling whisper of the wind played against the outside walls of Darkus. This too was rather a lulling sound, not one of imminent threat. Yet how strange to be dining in this strange house at such an early hour of the new day, at such an unheard-of time. Dinner, indeed!

Still, she had to admit, she was hungry. And the thick green soup floating in a steaming tureen sent up vapors both exhilarating and intoxicating. The unseen Mondro, lurking wherever he might be, had some skill as a cook. Her first taste of the hot soup was thoroughly convincing testimony to that.

The silverware, large and almost cumbersome due to exquisitely wrought workmanship and design, bore the matching wolf's head that she had noted on the doors to Darkus Castle. But on this occasion, she was able to make out the Latin motto inscribed on the handles of knives, forks, and spoons. *Nemo me impune lacessit.*

"I see you have discovered the family motto," Count said abruptly.

Rosalie looked up hastily.

"Yes." She smiled. "So grim it is."

The Count's heavy black eyebrows rose. "You can read Latin, Miss Lindquist? That makes you extraordinary."

Rosalie managed a slight shrug. "I was fond of the language in college, I'm afraid. It lends itself to my vocation as a schoolmistress, you see. Yes, I understand the words. 'No one wounds me with impunity.' Isn't that a rather strange rule to live by, Count Darkus?"

He seemed to bow, even though sitting, his

hands poised over a crust of bread. "Perhaps. Bu
for battle times and warrior ways, it is most effec
ive. A credo, as it were, to warn one's enemie
And therefore, entirely honorable. Yes, I try t
live by the maxim, Miss Lindquist. For Darkus, n
other dictum would serve as well."

"It's so . . . cruel, though. An eye for an eye.
Rosalie shuddered. "You mustn't mind me. I ar
just a gentlewoman. I find such aims and philoso
phies difficult to endorse."

"Of course," he replied graciously. "No apolog
is necessary. I hope the occasion never arises whe
you must gird your loins and do battle. Such gentl
hands and delicate beauty as you possess—th
work of vengeance is not for them."

She lowered her eyes to the soup, conscious o
a shock wave of crimson flooding her. Never ha
a gentleman remarked on her appearance so poin
edly and without sham or deceit of any kind. Sh
groped desperately for a way to change the subjec

"Wasn't there a story of Mr. Edgar Allan Poe'
that made some mention of that motto? I seem t
recall one."

The Count clapped his hands together lightly
"Bravo! 'The Cask of Amontillado.' A story of re
venge that takes place in the catacombs of Italy
The protagonist walls up his enemy alive, wit

trowel and mortar, for daring to trifle with his wife. . . ." Count Darkus's voice trailed off, his eyes going to the threshold. Rosalie followed his gaze.

Mondro stood in the entranceway. His enormous, cadaverous height was even more grotesque seen at this distance. He stood to one side of the threshold, solemly waiting. His face was expressionless. His long legs disappeared into jackboots; a soft, dark Russion shirt enveloped his torso, belted with a canary-yellow cord. Rosalie could now see that his hands were two gigantic, bony, knuckled extensions of his arms.

There was a sudden rustle of silk and a tiny jingle of bracelets or pendant earrings, and Lady Darkus swept into the hall. She seemed to glide with wraithlike buoyancy, as if her heels did not touch the stone floor. This illusion was created by the utter bell-like appearance of her dark gown, which concealed her legs. Her bodice was dark too, ornamented only with mother-of-pearl buttons lined up vertically. These ended at her throat, which revealed a lovely pale crest of bosom, which was but the dazzling field from which sprang one of the most amazingly beautiful faces that Rosalie har ever seen.

"I'm sorry I'm late, Alexander," Lady Darkus said in a low, hushed voice, walking quickly to her chair, which was across from him and to the left

of Rosalie's chair. "What must your guest thi
of me?"

"Please," Rosalie said hurriedly. "I am the i
truder here, and I assure you—"

Count Darkus chuckled, halting Rosalie's c
nial. "My dear ladies, let us spare ourselves the
petty social obligations. That you were hard
missed, my dear Carmela, is the absolute truth. W
were hungry, the soup is delicious, and Miss Lin
quist and I were having the most illuminating d
cussion about family mottos and Mr. Edgar All
Poe. Sit down, my dear. This is Miss Lindqui
whom a fickle Providence has placed in our hand
My wife, Carmela, Miss Lindquist."

Carmela Darkus, sitting regally in her cha
surveyed Rosalie warmly above the tapering pyr
mid of long, graceful fingers that wore no ador
ment of any kind. The dangling, triangular meda
ions of earrings fastened to each side of her he
gleamed as the Count's signet ring had. "De
Miss Lindquist. Welcome to Darkus Castle."

"Thank you, Lady Darkus. I owe your husba
my life."

"Oh." Lady Darkus's eyes stirred, looki
toward her husband, affording Rosalie the c
portunity of noting the lady's utterly bewitchi
beauty. The face was triangular, like the med
lions, yet miraculously softened with high, f

cheeks, a straight nose, lush Italianate lips, and teeth of such whiteness and perfection as to make her seem as unreal as a portrait in an artist's gallery. The eyes were large, luminous, and somehow sad, as the Count's were. The lovely face might smile, but the eyes would be forever detached and separate from the expression. "You must tell me what happened, Alexander. It was the Pass, wasn't it? And the townspeople again—of course. Did they attack you?"

Bewildered, Rosalie looked on as Count Darkus stilled his wife's astounding query and supposition with the garnet-ringed hand.

"Carmela," he chided, "what will our guest think if you elaborate so wildly? Townspeople, indeed! Have you forgotten the terrible storm that frightened you half out of your senses last night? No, there was no trouble with our neighbors. It seems that our Miss Lindquist was on her way to the Austrian border, when her coach lost a wheel on the Pass . . ."

Rosalie listened, admiring how deftly he got to the heart of the matter, disposing of the accident and her own misfortunes in a few simple, telling strokes. His choice of words was most effective—lucid, evocative, and forthright. Rosalie could see, no, she could feel, every sensation of the storm and the accident all over again. As she watched

Lady Darkus's face react to every nuance and detail, she fell to shuddering again. The gleaming candelabrum cast an eerie, unreal aura across the entire tableau of table, hall, and diners.

"So you see, my dear," Count Darkus concluded, "Miss Lindquist shall stay with us for the night. Tomorrow, Mondro can drive her to the border, where she can resume her journey. There, you see? That is all there is to the story. I am only too glad that Mondro and I had decided to be at the Pass at the right moment. There is no telling what might have happened to Miss Lindquist had we not been there."

"You poor dear." Lady Darkus turned her sorrowful eyes upon Rosalie. The pallor of her face and the brilliance of her eyes clashed. "You shall have some of my clothes—all that I have that you need."

Rosalie felt a flash of gratitude. "How hospitable you both are! Really, I'm overwhelmed. I don't know what to say."

"Say little," Count Darkus commanded. "And eat more. That, too, is a Darkus motto."

Rosalie laughed happily, feeling better again. "And a fine lot of common sense it makes." She reached for the platter of venison lying in heaping strips before her. As she did so, the hammered silver crucifix pinned to her bosom caught the

blaze of the multiple tapers. Lady Carmela Darkus suddenly caught sight of the object.

Not even a night filled with newness and strangeness and unfamiliarity could quite prepare Rosalie for what happened at the precise moment that her host's wife saw the crucifix.

Lady Darkus pushed back from the table, recoiling, her hands thrust up before her face to hold off and defend herself against some nameless, invisible threat. Her pale face blanched, her bold eyes popped, and her mouth worked, trying to scream.

The mother-of-pearl buttons danced above a bosom heaving with violence. The chair, heavy as it was, trapped Lady Darkus, preventing her from retreating to the safety she seemed to desire so fervently.

And then she screamed.

A long shrill, piercing cry that riveted Rosalie to the very seat she sat upon.

Darkus Castle throbbed with the scream, and the baronial hall, shadowed and eerie with the blaze of the tapers, held the scream fast in the clutch of its ancient history.

THE DUSK REVEALS

Chilled to the very marrow of her being, Rosalie could only stare. Her heart was beating so rapidly its hammering seemed to be the only sound in the world. The spectacle before her was too awesome and frightening to experience, let alone comprehend.

The high, vaulted room still held the lingering echoes of the woman's sudden scream. Gobbling undertones stole, ghostly, among the rafters.

Lady Carmela Darkus sat where she was, eyes tightly shut, hands clenched to her red mouth. And still she writhed, twisted, as if trying to escape from some unseen menace. Now small, piteous moans pushed back her lips, emerging as half-choked sounds. Utterly terrified and unable to think or move, Rosalie swung her gaze toward the Count.

The sight that greeted her eyes was yet more bewildering, perhaps more terrifying than Lady Darkus's screaming.

Count Darkus had inclined his head, resting it on one strongly bronzed hand, his very chin sunken forward. There was a vast sadness in his face, not terror or bewilderment. His wide, aristocratic shoulders seemed to flex as if shaking off some unwanted burden.

"Miss Lindquist . . ." His magical, resonant voice came from the depths of his soul. "Would you remove the crucifix from your dress, please? I do not wish to offend you, but it is most necessary. Would you do that, please?"

"Why, of course. Only . . ." Baffled, Rosalie's fingers fluttered to her bodice and unpinned the cross. She closed her palm over it tightly and held her hands across her lap, not knowing what else to do. Her eyes flew back and forth between the Count and Lady Darkus.

Count Darkus had raised his head and was now staring at his moaning wife. "Carmela, my dear, open your eyes. Miss Lindquist has removed the crucifix from your sight. How could she know? It is all right now, my dear. My fault, really. I should have explained to our guest the reason for your dread of the holy object, but in the excitement I failed to notice it. The gloom in here, despite the

candelabrum, is enormous. Please, Carmela—it is all right now, I say."

As a small child will peer beyond its fingers to see if the horrible creatures of the imagination have gone, Lady Darkus's luminous eyes opened. She looked fearfully at Rosalie, her bosom sucked in. When she convinced herself that Rosalie had truly done as the Count had asked, her relief was a visible, mammoth thing. Her lungs expelled a great gust of air, and her face relaxed. The nervous agitation of her body ceased. Color returned to her pale cheeks. With a trembling hand, she reached for the goblet of claret the Count extended to her and drained it at a swallow. Then she put the goblet down. Her bosom was still heaving. The swells of her pale flesh rippled. Rosalie didn't know what to make of such odd behavior. The terror within her own heart and mind lay uneasily in the shadows, but her curiosity was still uppermost.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. "I seem to have offended you. I assure you I did not know. I'm a stranger to your lovely country, and if the cross is a representation of something other than I know . . ." She paused lamely, not knowing what else to say. It was unthinkable that Father Luigi's crucifix could be a subject for shock in this castle, but what else was she to think? Once more, all her uncomfortable and uneasy notions about vampires

and demonology swept over her logical, reasoning mind.

"My dear . . ." Lady Carmela smiled a nervous smile. "What must you think? How could you know? Oh, dear God, forgive me! I must explain to you why sight of your beautiful silver crucifix made me react in such a heathenish manner! Alexander, help me—"

"Put it out of your mind, Carmela," the Count commanded without anger. "I shall explain to our guest. I'm sure she will hold no further grievance in the matter."

"Please do," Rosalie said. "I must confess I'm more fascinated than offended. Is that wicked of me?"

The Count eyed her with what she would have considered approval if the Count's face had not been always inscrutable. Yet his eyes had stirred in their old familiar way.

"No, Miss Lindquist. It does you credit. Your feelings suggest an open mind. Very well, I shall tell you, and you shall know. There are enough shadows in this ancient castle as it is."

"Thank you, Alexander," Lady Darkus said, and folded her hands in her lap, staring down at them. "I can bear to hear it when you tell the story. As awful as it is to me."

Rosalie was conscious of the whisper of the

wind beyond the room. She fancied she caught sight of Mondro's incredible silhouette, limned by the candlelight, as he prowled among the corners of the room. Count Darkus sighed.

"My Carmela was unfortunately present when her father and mother had the tragic accident that killed them both. Carmela was but a young girl of fourteen at the time. There had been another of these mountain storms which make quagmires and morasses of the roadways. Their coach plunged off the road into a ravine and then was carried by the swollen waters of the stream to a point some twenty kilometers away. When the rescue party found them, Carmela had gone along, beside herself with grief and worry. Sad to relate, her parents were crushed in the wreckage of the coach. Carmela's view of the bodies was registered on her mind in a shockingly ironic way. The glitter of the crucifix at the throat of her mother seemed to point like a finger to where the bodies lay. I'm afraid Carmela must ever associate the sight of her dead parents with a shining silvery crucifix. You see? A simple enough tale. But one that is fixed in Carmela's mind indelibly. You understand now, I think, Miss Lindquist? As you noticed, we do have religious articles in the household—my paintings, the books—but my dear wife cannot reconcile herself to the cross. A pity but the truth, nonetheless."

"Oh, but I do understand. You see, I am an orphan too. I lost my own parents in somewhat the same way. How terrible to have seen a thing like that! Please don't think about it, Lady Darkus, I *do* understand. Really I do."

Rosalie had blurted her feelings, not without a sad pride. Count Darkus's account had somehow formed an unseen bond between herself and Lady Darkus. There was a pragmatic aspect to being one who has been denied his or her parents by a cruel fate. That very same Fate places such people in a position of sharing a common bond, despite any other differences of appearance, religion or social class. The Count seemed to sense her outburst's nature. His smile was a slow, calm thing to see.

"You see, Carmela? Miss Lindquist understands. Come, no more tears. The bad moment has passed."

Carmela Darkus lifted her head. Her dark eyes glowed with gratitude.

"Thank you, Miss Lindquist. It is good of you to be so tolerant of my weakness."

"Please don't mention it. I feel the same way whenever anyone refers to lilacs blooming on a rainy day."

Count Darkus frowned. "Oh? Why, may I ask?"

"It was on just such a day that my father and

other died. A lightning bolt struck their home in pstate New York. I was away at school. That was long time ago; yet I cannot see a lilac without njuring up the entire day and the way I felt at e time. So you see, I wasn't just being polite hen I said I understood. A person never likes to e reminded of unhappy times and sad events."

"No," Count Darkus said in a strange, faraway ice. "They do not."

"Do tell us about America," Lady Darkus said ddenly and perhaps with more wisdom than any them. It was more charitable to change the subct and move on to more convivial topics of dission. The gloom of memory and the aura of inful nostalgia in such a wide, dark room as the ll was not conducive to good cheer.

Count Darkus nodded his approval, favoring his lely beautiful wife with one of his enigmatic iles. Rosalie smiled too. America. Yes, that was rth talking about. Yet for a moment she had mpletely forgotten the home of the brave and e land of the free. Darkus Castle did so seem like house in another world. One hardly imagined a iverse of books, study, and students cramming r their examinations. It was all so *other worldly*, w.

Rosalie idly wondered if two months on the ntinent has transformed her in any visible way.

She didn't feel any different; she had childishly wished for an acquired sophistication, an Old World polish, a veneer of culture. Somehow, she didn't think she had acquired it. She was certain that her glass would reveal the self-same honey-blonde, with a pert face and an air of Colonialism about her that would never alter. Not even with age and maturity.

Why, even Count Darkus, with his utter magnificence of lordly demeanor and bearing, made her feel like a simple schoolgirl. A blushing, giddy, irresponsible child. Hadn't he had to save her life? Damsel in distress, indeed.

"Yes, America," Count Darkus said. "I would like to hear of the New World. A world that has put an end to witch hunts and superstitions and the follies of the Middle Ages. Your Industrial Revolution was a gift of God, Miss Lindquist. When a man is busy with his mind and his hands, inventing machinery and using it, he has no time to spin fancies and ghost stories. I shall go to America one day. I'm sure of it. I want to very much. But until then, I and Carmela would like to hear you speak of your country. Who else is a better witness? You have lived there all your life. Surely, it is all they say it is."

Rosalie made a slight *moue* of disagreement.

"You do us honor, Count. But not even Amer-

ica is free of darkness—at times. We have had our fair share of terror and horror. Awful bloody things. The Civil War, Lincoln's assassination—even now, at the very turn of the century, Americans are fighting against bigotry and hatred. The sort of thing man has always had to contend with."

"True," the Count agreed. "But you have had no Spanish Inquisition, no Crusades of late. . . ."

"Nor have you," Rosalie chided.

His eyes glittered. "There are areas in Europe, my dear, that might as well be in the Dark Ages. Such as—here. Where superstition, devilish beliefs and creeds, still rule the minds of men. Hadn't you noticed, even on your short ride through our land?"

"I can't say that I have, truly."

"You are, as always," he said, "too kind." He reached for his wine glass.

Lady Darkus restrained a shudder.

"It's this house, Alexander. So dark—so cold. It makes you wary of even your own happiness and peace of mind. You should tear it down, brick by brick, stone by stone. Our ancestry hangs over us like a shroud."

"Perhaps, Carmela. But it is the home of my father and his father and his father before him. This is the home of Darkus. And here I will stay no matter how many hundreds of gullible, ignorant

townsmen storm our doors waving their grotesque charms and amulets in our faces. But they will not come. Never fair. Ignorance is not usually coupled with bravery."

Rosalie was thoroughly incapable of following this trend of the conversation. Discreetly, she sipped from her own wine glass as she watched them both. Now that her initial shock had passed, Carmela Darkus was as tranquil as a peaceful brook in a quiet countryside. Oddly enough it was the Count himself, he who was usually so complacent and self-controlled, whose face betrayed a moment's sullen fury. His eyes were stirring again, like burning embers fighting for survival in a dying fire.

"What room shall we place Miss Lindquist in?" Lady Darkus asked abruptly.

The Count looked surprised. "The chamber down the hall from yours would be the best, don't you agree? It is the one room that is prepared to receive a guest."

"Yes, certainly." Lady Darkus nodded. "It's very pleasant, actually. There's a breeze and a view of the roadway."

"Anything will do," Rosalie said timidly, wanting to be as little an inconvenience as possible. "I'm not one for lavish rooms. A bed to rest my

head is all I require. I just need a good night's sleep before I resume my journey."

"You'll be needing some clothing, since you lost your luggage. I've already instructed Mondro to place some at your disposal. You'll find them all ready for you when you retire." Again, oddly, it was Count Darkus who made this disclosure. But Lady Carmela was smiling in accord. Her lovely face was like a panel of a Madonna. "Shall we have some coffee now, Miss Lindquist?"

"Yes, please. The food was simply marvelous, thank you." She had the oddest sensation of not recalling that she had eaten any of the venison. How strange. Yet she was no longer hungry or aching from her misadventure on the Pass. The time spent in this curious hall, spiced with Lady Darkus's weird reaction to her silver crucifix, had seemed to drive all thoughts of the meal from her mind.

Count Darkus poured from a heavy brown urn of sorts into a formidable cup of wide circumference and ornate design. Rosalie's hand was lost on the handle. The coffee was black and very hot. It tasted thick and bitter. She sipped it gladly, however.

Lady Darkus had a cup also, as did the Count.

All three drank in a tight silence. The candle-

light flickered, tapers burning low. And still the wind whispered without. Time had once again seemed to stand still. It was very difficult to believe that she, Rosalie Lindquist, a schoolmistress from the United States. was dining in the great hall of an ancient castle well past the hour of midnight. Why, it must be very nearly three o'clock in the morning.

"*The bats,*" Lady Darkus said in the hushed silence. "*May they fly no more tonight.*"

"*Carmela!*" Count Darkus's outraged voice was like a whiplash across the table. Lady Darkus lowered her head to her cup once more, sipping quietly.

No more was said, but over Rosalie's trembling figure stole the tremendously disquieting feeling that all was not as it should be in Darkus Castle.

Her free hand closed feverishly over the silver crucifix on her lap. Squeezing it, crushing it. Its outline, heavy and strong, burned in her hand.

Burned.

When it should have felt *cold.*

All the dragons, devils, and torments of the earlier hours of the night came rushing back at her like a tidal wave. The rationalization she had used to dissolve all dreads and doubts vanished in the twinkling of an eye.

What if there truly were such things as vam-

pires? . . . Who in all the world could step forward and say without fear of contradiction, with an authority that would brook no arguments, that there were not?

Rosalie couldn't, for all her education and Father Luigi's wise Christian counsel.

It was further disquieting to her state of mind to recall with an instantaneous jab of fear that she had not seen one looking glass in all the time she had been in this house!

Trembling within her very skin, Rosalie grasped her silver crucifix all the more tightly.

All the powers of good might be needed before daylight dawned once more over Darkus Castle.

UNQUIET NIGHT

"Good night, Miss Lindquist. Sleep well."

"Oh, I will. I am thoroughly exhausted."

"Till the morning then."

The parting words of Count Alexander Darkus on the threshold of the dark chamber were strangely ominous. At any other time in any other place, they would have been pleasant, cheering expressions of goodwill. But the man standing before her, candlestick poised in his right hand, was so magnificently the Prince of Darkness. His hawk's face, raven's black hair, and thin, perfectly shaped mouth were a mask of cold handsomeness.

When he turned, he seemed to glide down the passageway, his broad shoulders framed in the glare of the candles. His shadow moved along the wall, flickering. As if he had wings. As if he were a . . .

Frightened, Rosalie swept into the chamber provided for her sleeping quarters and shut the door quickly. There was a heavy iron latch affixed to a chain. She shot this into place, surprised to find the apparatus in smooth working order. Lady Darkus had already retired to her own bedchamber down the hall. This was an enormous oaken door to the very left of high stained-glass windows looking out upon the abyss that yawned behind Darkus Castle.

Too disorderly of mind to think properly, Rosalie went almost mechanically through the motions of preparing for bed. She hardly noticed the array of garments lying on a huge, canopied bed whose deep environs boasted tasseled pillows and a counterpane of heavy brocaded wool. Yes, the nights at Darkus must be cold, she reasoned. The mist, the eternal dampness. Even now she could scarcely see beyond her latticed windows. An extraordinarily impenetrable fog blanketed the structure.

Either the Count or Mondro had set a medium-sized candelabrum on the armoire against the far wall. Despite the heavily fashioned sturdiness of this furnishing, the room was singularly bereft of accessories. The canopied bed and a matching velveteen chair seemed to be all there was. Not so much as a painting or a plaque adorned the

bare oak walls of the room. It mattered little to Rosalie. Her eyelids had begun to flutter, drooping with fatigue. A great weariness, abetted by the late meal and wine, had overcome her.

In moments, she had undressed, finding to her delight that she and Lady Darkus were of a similar size. A most becoming peignoir of black silk fitted her to a faretheewell.

There was no hearth in the room, and a dismal aura of dampness and cold permeated the very floorboards. Waiting no longer, Rosalie extinguished the candles and sprang into the heavy bed, burrowing under the heavy counterpane. The budding chill on her flesh and in her bones subsided slowly, to be replaced by gradual, almost heartwarming sense of comfort and well-being.

She tried to think in the darkness, listening to the wind batter the castle, hearing the eaves whisper and groan. Somewhere a soughing sound moved through the trees surrounding Darkus Castle. The vision of Count Darkus, Lady Darkus, and tall, wraithlike Mondro bobbed before her mind's eye. Memory of Mr. Grieg and the coach and four hurtling through the rain came back to her.

But within seconds, all the images fled.

Rosalie Lindquist was asleep.

Worn and spent, the schoolmistress from Amer-

ca had fallen into deep slumber, despite her fears.

The fluttering noise at the casement windows roke her up. She could not have said when the ound first reached her subconscious. But sudenly, she was wide-awake, immobile, her eyes xed directly ahead on the tall casements at the nd of the room.

It was magical.

The fog seemed to have evaporated. A full, almost blinding flood of moonlight washed into the oom, laying the shadows of the latticework across ne wooden floorboards.

There was now a full moon. And something lse.

Rosalie's mind ceased to function. She could nly stare, fighting that silent battle which proclaims the difference between a dream and wakeulness.

A fanlike, flickering shadow hung poised gainst the casements, outlined against the glass. oised suspended and fluttering, its black wings eating a fierce, yet rhythmic tattoo in the empty ir.

A bat.

A black, hideous creature whose pinpoint eyes eemed to gleam like blazing coals against the assed black of its silhouette. Accompanying the apping of the wings, there came a low, squeaking,

rodentlike noise. The sound, even more than sight, of the awesome winged thing set the very nape of Rosalie's neck to tingling. Her heart stopped beating. She held her breath, still trying to determine whether she was awake or dreaming.

But no—now the bat was attacking the casements as if it sought to batter its way past the lock. The squeaking sound rose to nearly a scream. Rosalie felt the blood of her trembling body grow cold. It was all so unreal, so fanciful. This could not be happening. *Or could it?*

Before she could provide an answer to her own question rioting in her terrified mind, the bat emitted one short yip of sound and then wheeled off into the night, out of sight. It had disappeared as magically as it had come.

The casements showed nothing but moonlight and a pale misty sky. The squeaking melody of the bat's passage seemed to echo far into the reaches of the darkness and the imagination.

For one long moment, Rosalie stared. Her terror lessened, but her curiosity quickened. So much so that without a further thought as to the advisability of her action, she flung aside the bedcovers and ran to the casements. Not even the coldness of the floor beneath her naked feet could allay her desire to know if there were such things

bats making free use of the sky around Darkus astle.

All the doubts and fears of the day and night ould be borne no longer. She had pushed back to the farthest recesses of her mind, Lady arkus's shrinking from the sight of a crucifix and at final *outre* remark at the dinner table. All ount Darkus's strange comments and pointed ferences to the townspeople and their behavior ward him now all rushed to the fore. One did not ve to believe in vampirism, no, one did not have give credence to the legends of the eternal dead ho take blood and nourishment from the living. ut one did not also have to be a blind fool who n about saying "Such things cannot be" and hop- g such a statement would serve as proof positive gainst the devil and his work.

Not even her careful schooling and high schol- tic attainments had bulwarked Rosalie Lindquist gainst the nagging, undermining certainty that ience and goodwill cannot successfully explain *erything* on God's green earth.

So it was that she stood at the casements, trem- ing in her night dress, her eyes scouring the virons of Darkus Castle for proof of some kind. or ammunition against the darkness of her oughts.

Her bedroom window was some thirty feet above the ground. There were lichen and moss clinging to the ancient stone sides of Darkus Castle —but nothing more. The nearest window to her own was a full twenty yards off. This must be Lady Darkus's bedroom. No light showed from the dark niche on the side of the structure.

The new moonlight flooded the grounds, limning every bush, tree, and flagstone with a dewy aura. The castle loomed gray and ghostly by moonlight. No illumination shone from any portion of the household. The high turreted outline of Darkus stood silent and foreboding. The utter vastness of the place, its wings and rambling mass of stone and masonry, now hit her with full impact. Darkus Castle could have housed an army of infantry.

There was no sight or sound of the bat that had disturbed her slumber. Nor was there anything else to intrique her curiosity.

She remained at the window a long time, trembling, uncertain, afraid.

Her fingers closed about the crucifix once more. It hung from her throat on its beads. She had decided to wear it that way, rather than risk offending Lady Darkus by pinning it to her bosom in the daytime. Lady Darkus and her husband, the Count.

What a strange couple they were! Why didn't ey share the same room? Surely that would be e normal arrangement. . . .

Rosalie felt a flush of embarrassment with her- lf for entertaining such intimate thoughts. Pur- osefully, she returned to her bed, burying herself nder the warm counterpane.

In the darkness, she made the sign of the cross. hank heaven, when daylight came she would uit this place and resume her journey. Darkus as not the sort of household she could envision rself enjoying for an indefinite stay.

Bats, indeed!

How terrified she would have truly been had e filthy creature managed to gain entry into the om!

The mental image that this thought gave full ing set her to trembling again. She huddled un- r the bedclothes fearfully.

Again, fatigue and sheer demoralization took eir toll, and she fell asleep.

When she descended the curving stone staircase e next morning, it was indeed a new day. There as no gloom, not a shadow of doubt in her mind, d she was quite resolved not to mention to the ount her experience with the bat. It would serve o useful purpose to tell him. She would be gone,

and there was no reason to disturb a man who had been so hospitable.

Darkus by daylight was a revelation, though. Much of the Castle was in a state of complete disrepair. Walls had crumbled, and heavy, unsightly cracks meandered along the walls and masonry. It was obvious that the Count used only those rooms which served his needs. A great estate had fallen on evil times.

Hard times, as they said in America.

It reminded Rosalie of the truism that aristocracy and royalty, by their own nature, must inevitably die out all over the world. People didn't live that way any more. The whole notion of kings, barons, earls, and the feudal system must one day disappear. There would be no more serfs or slaves. No more power being granted simply by the accident of birth. Surely, one man was as good as another and the whole scheme of royalty and sovereignty was as moth-eaten and worn-down as Darkus Castle appeared.

A dying institution, a dead hierarchy.

Fortified by what she felt was her native Yankee common sense and goodwill, Rosalie was in fine fettle. The darkness and the nightmares had dissolved with the sunlight of a new day. She once again longed for the open road and adventure, eager to be on her way.

"Ah, Miss Lindquist. Good morning. I was bout to send Mondro to summon you, but I see ou are up."

"Good morning, Count Darkus."

He stood at the entrance to the study, as tall, andsome and altogether as striking as ever. His ace was freshly shaved, his hair gleaming. Only ne threadbare quality of his morning coat, cravat, nd gray trousers revealed his approaching finan- ial debilitation. His pointed sideburns were as et-black as printer's ink.

He bowed, smiling. His flat smile.

"Breakfast is almost ready. You slept well, I rust?"

"I couldn't keep my eyes open very long. Yes, hank you, I was quite comfortable."

"Good, good. I'm afraid Carmela will not join s. She has a wretched headache. She said to make er goodbyes. I have arranged that Mondro will rive you to wherever you desire."

Rosalie felt a twinge of disappointment. She vould have liked to see the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, once more before she was gone. n the daylight, as if to test that almost miraculous oveliness.

"I have a reservation at the Weiderdorf Inn. It vas to be my next stop on the journey. Would Mondro know where that is?"

"Mondro knows everything in these parts. Mute though he is, his mind is a match for my own. Consider it done. Are the garments satisfactory?"

"Oh, I wouldn't think of borrowing any of Lady Darkus's things. How would I ever return them to you? No, thank you. This dress is a bit wrinkled, but it will do until I get to the inn and can make some arrangements about getting some new things.

He shrugged. "I will not argue with feminine reasoning. As you wish. However, there is something I should like to discuss with you before you leave this house forever."

"Oh?"

He paused, as if uncertain. Then the flat smile flashed again. "Do come into the study. I feel more fortified there. The atmosphere of my possessions, you see. Yes, I think I can tell you best there. Will you come?"

"Certainly."

She followed him again, as she had the night before, unmindful of the etiquette that demanded that she should precede him. The Count did not seem to notice, perhaps heedless of a custom that might only be American.

The study was pleasant, barely contrasting with how it had appeared the night before. The great paintings, the rows of thick leather tomes, the

rophies, did have an aura of respectable solidity and comfort. Count Darkus gestured Rosalie to a baronial chair. He did not sit himself, preferring to stand. He stared down at her keenly, his eyes measuring her.

Rosalie clasped her hands nervously. The man was so forceful and compelling, one could not but be aware of his magnetic presence. It was like having a hawk hover above you.

"Can you tell me now, Count?" she said lightly, striving for some calm. "I'm bursting with curiosity."

"Yes, I can," he said with brusque swiftness. He folded his arms, his head cocked. "What would you say to an offer to stay on here at Darkus, as the paid companion of my wife?"

DEPARTURE

Count Alexander Darkus's amazing offer was so sudden and unforeseen that Rosalie could only stare at him for a long moment. But he returned her gaze with equanimity as if he had suggested nothing more startling than another cup of hot tea.

"Well?" he asked challengingly. "Is it as untoward as all that? You appear shocked and shamed by my suggestion."

"No, no," she replied quickly. "It's just so unusual. I'm afraid I didn't expect you to ask."

"And why should you?" He bestowed another of his bloodless smiles. "I should have given you warning, I suppose. But you are ready to fly from our midst. There is no other way."

"But how could I stay here? I'm expected back

in school. My duties, my career . . ." She paused, more confused than ever. Herself as a paid companion to the mistress of this dark, crumbling castle? To be at the beck and call of a pale, lovely creature whose fantastically attractive yet frightening husband would always be underfoot; to spend perhaps a year, perhaps more, surrounded by this unwholesome Old World environment? She restrained a visible shudder. She must not offend this man. He had been kind, and obviously there was a legitimate need for her services. Still, the whole idea was unthinkable.

"I would pay you a fine sum of money if you but consent, Miss Lidnquist. Do not be deceived by the fallen grandeur of Darkus Castle. We are in reality eminently wealthy. It is simply that I see no use in gilding a lily that blooms unseen." He gestured broadly at their surroundings. The cobwebbed stone, the crumbling mortar, the cracked walls. Yet he did so with pride. His carriage would never lose any of its regal mien.

"Really, it is kind of you to ask."

"Then you agree."

"I'm sorry. I cannot. It is quite out of the question. My friends and the college expect me back in the country next month. I couldn't change my plans at this last moment. I just couldn't." She

strove to keep her voice from rising. She felt she was shouting, being more forceful than was actually necessary.

Count Darkus shrugged. "Carmela will be disappointed, but—we will say no more on the matter. The subject is closed."

"Thank you. I don't want to offend you, Count Darkus."

"Nonsense. It was my place to offer, your choice to make. I suggest now that we hasten to the hall for some breakfast. It seems a lovely day is in the offing, and you should start on your journey as soon as possible. Meanwhile, we shall fortify you with some good food. Come."

Again, the command. Again, the easy extension of his arm and his vocal hypnosis. Rosalie found herself moving to him, lulled on by his sweet, resonant voice. Her heart pounded. Count Alexander Darkus had a magnetic hold on her senses. It frightened her. Whether she gave any coin to the tales of vampires or not. Her mind had been made easy by memory of one particular aspect of vampire lore. They did not stalk in daylight, did they? At daybreak they were supposed to steal quietly back into their coffins to rest until the sun went down. And here it was a warm, well-lighted morning, and Count Darkus was not in the least bit a

furtive ghoul of darkness. Though, it was true, she had seen no mirrors. . . .

Rosalie wondered what he would say to her if he but knew the range of her thoughts. Vampires. Fiddlesticks!

He was just a tall, romantic, dark-looking man, right out of classic literature, the sort of individual who fires the imagination of an observer. Was that his fault? Of course not.

Count Darkus led her back to the great hall. The wide oak table stood ready. Tall Mondro, silent as ever, was gliding about the place settings, moving utensils and napkins. At a sign from Count Darkus, a curious hand and finger sequence of motion, Mondro withdrew. The Count beckoned Rosalie to a chair and seated himself. He did not draw a chair for her.

"Sign language," Rosalie murmured, her awe of the Count increasing. "You know the communications of the mute?"

"Yes. It was necessary, you see. Mondro has always been as you see him. But I do not think of him as—what is that shameful expression?—deaf and dumb? He reads lips, too, and in reality, I find his mind of the highest order."

"I don't doubt that. Does Lady Darkus know the language?"

Count Darkus's eyes stirred. A bleak expression encompassed his handsome face. "Sadly, no. My Lady is a bit high-strung. She seldom likes to be alone with Mondro, though I would trust him with her life. But my wife is rather sensitive and fanciful. Sight of Mondro and his hands moving in communication tends to upset her."

"I'm sorry." Rosalie stared down at her plate. Count Darkus chuckled, not unkindly.

"I suppose he would never disturb a person such as yourself, Miss Lindquist. No, I would think not. You seem to be one of those blessed people who have room in their hearts for charity and sympathy. I salute you. It is a very amiable quality, especially in a woman, and speaks well for your character."

Rosalie could feel herself glowing beneath the compliment. Her pulse quickened. Again, as he always could, Count Darkus had reached the very core of her womanhood. She imagined she was blushing furiously, and it was disconcerting.

"The Weiderdorf Inn," he said, changing the subject as if he had detected her discomfort. "A charming hostelry. You will find it pleasant, if not a tonic. On several trips in that direction, I have had occasion to halt there. Until circumstances prevented my . . ." The Count paused, shrugging

again. "Eat well, Miss Lindquist. You have a long road ahead of you."

Rosalie looked at him. "Count Darkus."

"Yes?"

"Let me say again how sorry I am that I couldn't accept your kind offer."

"Please. Let us speak no more of it. As I said, the subject is closed. Now that I think of it, why should a bright flower such as yourself—a creature of the sunlight, as it were—wall herself up in this ancient and forbidding place?"

There was no more to be said. He had reached for the coffee urn, brushing a speck of lint from his threadbare morning coat. Rosalie followed his preference and had nothing further to say about the matter.

They had their breakfast, kippers, thick black bread, and coffee, in mutual silence.

The sunshine played in through the high windows, exposing the dust, cold stones, and faded glories of Darkus Castle. Rosalie felt oddly sad and forlorn, now that her departure was so imminent.

Within the hour, she would be far away from this place and might never see this strange man again. How curious it all was! A mere day's ac-

quaintance and yet she felt she knew him better than any other man she had ever known.

Why was this so?

Father Luigi, with all his age and wisdom, might understand, but she could not.

It was most perplexing.

The time had come to make her last farewells. The black, glittering phaeton of last night's eerie adventure stood waiting on the flagstones. Mondro was seated on the platform, solemn and mute in stove-pipe hat and dark, ill-fitting coat. The horses, big, heavy mares, pawed impatiently at the ground. Weirdly, the weather had altered remarkably. It was still early morning, but the sun had vanished and gray clouds filled the skies. Far off, she could see the dim, craggy outline of the mountains. Darkus Castle by daylight was merely a heterogeneous collection of stones, turrets, and pinnacles. It appeared so defeated, so run-down, so *dead*.

Count Darkus was at the door of the phaeton, hatless in the wind as he spoke to her through the window. His dark sheen of hair rustled faintly in the breezes. His bold, enigmatic eyes, still holding sorrow and something else, caressed her where she sat. Rosalie, primly seated, her hands folded across her lap, stared back at him.

"There is a storm coming," the Count said

onelessly. "But it is hours off. You will be safe
vith Mondro. He will see you to the Weiderdorf
nn in time, never fear."

"How can I thank you for all you've done? Apart from saving my life yesterday . . ."

"Hush. It was a Christian duty, was it not?"

"You are too gracious, so I will only say thank ou, with all my heart."

"Is not virtue its own reward?" He nearly challenged her with the maxim. "Godspeed, Miss Roslie Lindquist. Go back to your America and live he good life. The full, happy life promised to us y the saints. Will you do that for me?"

"I'll try." She smiled. "Goodbye, Count Darkus. Please make my farewells to Lady Carmela. I'm orry I didn't see her before I left."

"Not half so sorry as she." He stepped back rom the door and waved his hand. *"Au revoir."*

For a moment, the tableau held. The Count tanding there, limned against the solid bulk of Darkus Castle, and then his hands moved in that dd, mystic way. The horses shot forward, accomanied by the snapping lash of Mondro's whip. The phaeton jounced. In a flash, Count Alexander Darkus was but a tall, distant silhouette framed n the dusty roadway before his home. A shadow upporting itself on a walking stick.

Rosalie settled back against the leather cush-

ions, watching the Count's impressive figure recede in the distance, and then the topography changed, trees closed in, mountains rose to the sky, and he was gone. The phaeton sped ahead, horses neighing and panting with the first exertions of their performance.

The gray skies billowed, moving clouds about like so many ships on stormy seas. And Darkus Castle fled back into memory, no more to be seen or feared, to be remembered only as a strange place visited once in the dead of night. It was all so like a dream. The Count, his Lady, the castle, Mondro. Rosalie collected all her somber thoughts and irritating responses into one neat pile and tucked them into an orderly corner of her mind.

Of what use to think of Darkus Castle now? Time enough later to reflect upon its possible secrets and bizarre behavior. The incident of the silver crucifix and the sighting of the bat had their place somewhere in the scheme of things, but what that place was she could not have said.

Lady Carmela. A headache. Surely he could have allowed her to say goodbye, if only for a moment. Curious. Very, very curious.

Grimly, she closed her mind to the subject, taking in her surroundings. The picturesque countryside, seen through the windows of the carriage, was everchanging and gloriously fascinating. The

oadway of the Pass snaked and twisted through oping hillsides and forests of trees and foliage. astel shades of greens, browns, and pale yellows uffused the landscape. There was a fine smell of ings growing in the air. As dark and ominous as ne sky was becoming, it felt good to be alive.

Poor Mr. Grieg. Her thoughts flew back to her river of only yesterday. She hoped with all her eart that he had somehow managed to escape eath in the crash of the carriage. Perhaps the ount had been wrong. He could have been rown too and then stumbled off into the night, azed, forgetful of his passenger. Yes, that was ossible. All things were possible. Look at how ne herself had escaped destruction. Thank the ord that Count Darkus had chosen that moment come along. It was a miracle of timing. A great incidence that his phaeton should be on the ass on such a terrible night.

Darkus. Count Darkus.

His image persisted in her mind, try as she ight to banish it to memory's dark land. What an traordinary personage! He did indeed belong on e pages of romantic novels.

The jouncing yet rhythmical passage of the aeton was now lulling. She felt her eyelids ooping. Again, this was strange. She had only isen an hour or so ago. And yet she had had a

fitful night's sleep. She would have read, but all her belongings were gone. She had not a stick of luggage, not even a scrap of paper to write upon. Thoughtfully, she placed her fingers about the beaded crucifix dangling under her cape. Its cool outline was comforting and reassuring. Father Luigi's Holy Bible! With a sudden start, she realized that the seat on which she sat held an object she had not noticed upon entering. Bewildered yet overjoyed, she saw that it was indeed the thick, gilt-edged, black leather missal the dear Father had given her in the long ago. How had she not seen it immediately or wondered at its loss?

She seized it hastily, turning pages to assure herself that it was truly her own Bible. And it was. The flyleaf opened before her still bore the small, fine script of Father Luigi's dedication and blessing. "For Rosalie, a daughter of God. Father Angelo Luigi."

Heart beating, Rosalie tried to solve the enigma.

She had lost the Bible yesterday in the accident. It had not been in her luggage, of course, since she always kept it at her side, but she had been certain of its loss, without having the time to dwell upon the event. And now, here it was! Count Darkus or Mondro had evidently recovered it at the scene of the accident and placed it in this phaeton where she was sure to find it. But again, how strange!

hy not just hand it over? Why this circuitous ethod of returning an object to its proper owner? It was all so confusing.

Yet paramount in her mind was the thought at her Bible was back in her hands. How splend and wonderful. It seemed to say to her, in ud and tumultuous thoughts, that all was right ith the world. It had a blessed prophetic quality. er blood raced with newfound happiness and joy.

The phaeton hurried on toward the Weiderdorf n, racing the dark, threatening skies all the way. Mondro's whip was an intermittent crack of ound on the long journey.

Rosalie, content, her mind at ease, felt herself ifting off once more into sleep.

DEADLY JOURNEY

She awoke to the creaking of the phaeton's wheels. For a moment as she tried to orient herself, she was frightened. But then she saw the familiar landscape of tors and forest through the carriage window, and she was calmed. Oddly, though, the angry gray skies were now a solid wall of almost darkness. It was not late in the day, for she could not have slept long, but scarcely a glimmer of clear light showed. It was more like a foul gathering of dusk when the sun goes down.

The lurching sway of the phaeton coming to a full stop at a forked break in the roadway was what had caused her to come awake. She straightened herself, righting her bonnet, which was askew, and sat forward to peer out the carriage windows.

Mondro had paused at the crossroads as if to etermine which of the three routes to take. But was not that at all. Only one glance served to eveal why Count Darkus's manservant had sud- enly halted in the middle of seemingly nowhere. n truth, there were no signposts or milestones to ark the route.

But there was a veritable mob of angry, milling en fairly surging toward the phaeton, bearing oft unlighted torches. Rosalie paled, her heart ipping a beat. Never had she seen violence so anifest in people, so openly displayed as one ight wear a war helmet and shield. Yet these men ere obviously farmers, townspeople.

A hoarse shout went up from one of the men, eckoning toward the phaeton. The mob moved rward, blocking the roadway down which Mon- o obviously chose to travel. The reins and harn- ses of the horses were seized in rough hands. ondro stood firm on the driver's seat, his whip enched in his right hand. Rosalie, terrified, aned from the window of the coach, the better hear and see what happened.

It was clear that something had happened. Some eat event that had made a mob out of simple, ugh, plain people. The phaeton swayed as the rses recoiled before the crowd, but Mondro held em fast.

Now she could make out the tenor of the voices, hear the actual words that were being shouted:

"That's the driver for Darkus! That devil! What's he doing here at this time?"

"It's him done it! Make him talk! He'll know where the girls got to!"

"Drag him down! Make him talk! Before the dirty work is done! . . ."

At a rush now, the angry, seething men encircled the phaeton, surrounding the horses and the platform where Mondro towered. Rosalie could not see the giant's face, could not intervene. But she saw the rigidity and the whiteness of the knuckles of the hand closed about the driving whip.

"What did you do with them?' another man roared, his face mottled with fear and rage. "If that hellish master of yours has harmed my daughter . . ." The rest of the tirade was lost in a fresh, unified roar of outrage from the milling men.

Before Rosalie could cry out, to ask what it was all about, Mondro had reacted in his own fashion. The long whip cracked, a stinging crackling sound, and the lead horses whinnied in terror and pain, their forelegs flying. The knot of men dispersed, falling back before the oncoming rush of the animals. The unlighted torches flailed. Again, Mondro applied the bite of the lash. The

rses leaped forward. The mob fell back, shout-
g, screaming, cursing.

"The dummy knows!" someone yelled. "That's
ny he's running away! Stop him, for God's sake,
fore it's too late!"

Men spilled past the window, their baffled, an-
y faces seeing Rosalie for the first time. Anger
ve way to incredulous stares of disbelief. Rosalie
anted to scream, to shout a warning to Mondro
stop, but the steady crack of the whip cut
rough everything. The phaeton fairly sprang
om the fatal ground. Rosalie was swept along
e a leaf in the tide. Before she could check her
dy, her figure flew against the upholstery and
r forehead collided with the handle of the car-
ge door. In one terrifying instant of doubt, ter-
r, and amazement, she saw the end of the world
ain. The milling faces of the mob, the waning
y, the entire tableau, all blotted out in an instant.
The coach hurtled forward. And that was the
t Rosalie Lindguist remembered. This time,
like the night before, unconsciousness was ab-
ute and supreme.

All the world was darkness.

The bedchamber at Darkus Castle was a fa-
liar sight. Somehow when she finally opened
r eyes, it was to recognize and remember all that

surrounded her and all that had happened. Only a great lassitude of body and spirit prevented her from experiencing deep fright. All was so dream-like, so vague and wispy. There was no substance to anything. Her figure felt weightless and feathery. She felt no pain, nor did she realize the extent of her injuries.

Darkus Castle.

The same bedchamber she had spent last night in.

Nothing had changed. Once more it was difficult for her to choose between the real and the unreal.

Also, it was night again. Candlelight glared from the armoire. She moved her head slightly, to see Count Alexander Darkus sitting at her bedside, his face sober, obviously patiently awaiting her recovery. His face smiled. The shadows of the room touched the corners of his mouth with sharp angles.

"Ah," he murmured. "You return to us. Good. How are you feeling, Miss Lindquist?"

"I'm not sure . . . I feel . . . anything . . . at àll. . . ."

"You struck your head against the door of the coach. Mondro did not realize that until he brought you back. Please do not blame him for what occurred."

"What *did* happen?"

Count Darkus bent forward, his eyes roving
er her forehead.

"You shall have a bit of a lump, but it will go
time. As long as it wasn't more serious." He
tled back in his chair. "What happened? you
. The usual nonsense. But I will explain."

She tried to nod, feeling comfortable and
angely secure despite the knowledge that her
had once more been delayed, suspended as it
re, and she was back in the frightening old
use where the bizarre and the unfamiliar walked
nd in hand.

"Please do. Those men—I was so frightened
d confused . . ."

"The phaeton when it was stopped," Count
rkus said in a flat voice, "was close to the vil-
e of Larkmore. It seems they have had a local
sation. Three of the youngest and fairest of
ir offspring—three maidens, in fact—have dis-
peared. Curious, is it not? That they should
m a mob and attempt to take the law into their
n hands for some nameless crime they have no
ysical proofs of as yet."

Rosalie shook her head. "But I don't under-
nd."

"A pity that you should be delayed once more
ignorance and superstition. Fortunately, Mon-
had his wits about him. I told you I treasure

his mind. He managed to extricate you both from that mob scene. He brought you back here. It was the first thought he had, you see. He relies on my judgment completely, and it was precisely what I would have done under the same circumstances."

Unable to comprehend fully the meaning of what he was saying and again feeling glad to be safe and sound once again, she could only stare at this strange benefactor and host. How could she make sense out of the behavior of the crowd? She had never seen a violent mob of men before, though she had read of such things. Still, why should they attack the Darkus carriage and make all those terrible threats and accusations?

He saw the unasked questions in her eyes, the ones poised on her lips. His ironic chuckle sounded once more.

"Don't you see? These three maidens have surely been kidnapped by vampires. Those creatures of the night that stalk these hills. Ah, my dear schoolmistress—you do not fully appreciate the Dark Ages that claim the minds of mortal man. Education, knowledge—these assets alone will not save them, I fear."

Rosalie shuddered. As lightly as he had said the words, they were heavy with sarcasm and wounded pride.

"But that's preposterous," she managed to murmur. "There are no such things as vampires!"

"Of course not," he agreed, his eyes flashing. "Who is there to prove that there are? Still, our angry villagers must have their ignorant sport. Sometimes I think it amuses them to believe in devils and vampires."

She felt her senses beginning their familiar waltz of confusion again. This man, this castle, his wife, the crucifix, her strange behavior at the dinner table . . .

"How is Lady Carmela?"

He arched his brows, as if he considered the question unusual for one already indisposed herself. "Much improved, thank you. You will see for yourself tomorrow. Once more, I offer you my humble accommodations."

"I haven't any choice," she said weakly. "Therefore, I accept most gladly."

"You are welcome here." He stood up. Tall, commanding. He bowed from the waist. "Get some more rest. There is a bell at your side. Should you need anything, do not hesitate. I or Mondro will come to you."

"Thank you again, Count Darkus."

"We will no longer discuss your thanks, Miss Lindquist."

So saying, he swept from the room, moving quietly, gliding in that graceful, elegant manner of his.

Rosalie watched him depart, with mingled emotions of gladness and regret.

The confusions were mounting one by one, forming such an insurmountable pile of paradoxes and contradictions, that when it toppled, she would be buried beneath a maze of disorder.

Her hands once more stole to the crucifix dangling from her throat. If God were needed in this house, she meant to keep him with her at all times. No devil in the world was a match for the Almighty.

The candlelight wavered, the walls coalesced into patterns of shadow and orange light. The heavy purple drapes flung patches of inky blackness across the floor.

Outside, winds buffeted, setting up a fierce insistent din. She fancied she heard a dog baying somewhere—though there was no moon to bay at. Night had closed over Darkus Castle once more. For Rosalie, the dream was continuing. The one that had seemed to have no end since last night on the Karlopian Pass.

That space in time seemed like centuries.

Was it only yesterday that she had stepped from

ıe clear light of reason into this deep, dim pool of onjecture?

She slept a disturbed sleep, waking constantly t each slam of a shutter on a casement window, ach rustle and sigh of the tall trees lining the flag-oned courtyard. The darkness of the room, with ıe tapers extinguished, was nearly Stygian. Ros-lie, secure with the door bolted and latched from ithin, huddled in the big bed. Her mind seethed ith emotions, weighing the facts that nighttime nded to distort. She was certain that Count Alex-nder Darkus. last surviving member of an ancient ne, was the sad victim of history. Those ignorant eople of Larkmore . . . It was awful about the ree young girls, but to imagine such a fine man s the Count had any hand in such a sordid affair as ridiculous.

He might be odd. true, but that was only his unning difference and unique personality. Lady armela was a strange one too, but how could she e otherwise as the wife of Darkus? The man must e a legend in his own time.

Restlessness and inability to keep her eyes osed longer than a full minute drove Rosalie to ıe windows. The night was cool, the bedchamber old, but she wrapped herself in a heavy bathrobe

of wool and red piping that had been left for her use on the chair by the bed.

The view from the windows was ghostly and ethereal. Fog had stolen across Darkus, dimming the courtyard, making of the wall of trees an almost impenetrable mass of gloom. Rosalie shuddered, wondering if the bat she had seen the night before was still in the vicinity. She still hadn't quite resolved her thinking to the firm fact that she had indeed seen the winged monster. Bats, *ugh*.

As wide-awake as she was, she was not prepared for the strange sight that soon greeted her. Below her window, where the fog hugged the damp stones of the courtyard, an apparition loomed. She started, drawing back, cowering to one side of the drapes, but she could not tear her eyes away. Another monstrous paradox had joined the seemingly endless chain of enigmas.

Three tall, shrouded figures rose in the fog, walking across the courtyard. They seemed to glide rather than walk. Long, filmy transparencies of garment trailed from their figures. Rosalie's brain was in confusion. The forms were very nearly in silhouette, and she could make out the barest curves of womanhood. Each of the figures wore its hair free and long. Flowing tresses washed down their slender backs. In an instant, as if by some magical process, the three figures melted into

mists, disappearing right before her eyes. But at was most heart-stopping of all was the deathly lness of the passage of the three women. They ght have drifted off into nothing, so silently and mly had they come and gone.

Had she truly seen the tall, imperious figure of nan beckoning from somewhere in the mists? was it but another tortured figment of her aulted imagination?

Her eyes strained into the fog below.

Nothingness. Only the rising vapors and the ling tendrils of mist greeted her vision. The fog d swallowed up her freshest hallucination.

She crept back to her bed, clutching her crucifix. errible ague of trembling gripped her.

It was all so clear now. Too true. Her imagina- n had not tricked her. There had been three men in the fog below.

And who else could they be but the three miss- maidens of Larkmore?

No matter what happened, come hell, damna- n, or catastrophe, she would quit these premises the morning. Oddly, she still held some peculiar t of trust for Count Darkus—about Lady Dar- s, she was not too sure. Nor Mondro, the mute nt.

But whatever hellish work was going on in this tle, she wanted no part of it.

She wanted nothing but the goodness of things, the holiness of a proper Christian life. If the profane lurked in the halls and rooms of Darkus Castle, she must do all in her power to exorcize those evils.

There was simply no other way for her to live or think. Had she not grown to womanhood following the doctrines of the Good Book?

Inevitably, with her spirits chilled and all her inner doubts aroused, she dreamed. A nightmare dream. Filled with all the horrors and terrors of childhood. A whirling, frenzied, darkened sleep world peopled with all the haunting ugliness of the black corners of the human mind.

The sight of those three spectral women in the courtyard, emerging and then vanishing in the mists, had brought forth the complete surrender of her subconscious intellect to the forces of darkness and evil.

In her nightmare, she was once again on the Karlopian Pass. The coach and four seemed to fly, as if its wheels scarcely touched the damp, rotting earth. Mr. Grieg, very much alive, was whipping the horses with insensate cruelty. The long black whip cracked and lashed like a snake. But in her dream, the sound of its contact on slavering, wretched horses was like some stroke

f thunder. Each flick of the lash was accompanied
y a burst of thunder.

There were rain and wind and lightning. Huge,
agged flashes fired the night sky. The coach, the
orses, Mr. Grieg's angry, muffled figure were all
nasses of pitch black. Stark, vividly impression-
stic. She huddled in the interior of the coach, cry-
ng, screaming, afraid. Yet she could not hear her
wn voice. She held her mouth open, straining,
ttempting to scream. Silence, only silence.

Until the whip cracked, the horses shrieked, and
he winds and rains tore and howled. The Pass
vas some fantastic roadway, curving, bending,
ipping toward the great Unknown.

Rosalie twisted in her bedcovers, caught up in
he grim ordeal, unable to awaken, to release her-
elf from the prison of her thoughts.

And then the phaeton loomed ahead. Coming
n. A long, flowing, hurtling object. The eyes of
he lead horses burned like coals in the darkness.
Mondro's enormous figure hunched in grotesque
uidity on the driver's platform. The phaeton car-
ied no riding lights. The Karlopian Pass seemed
o tilt, heeling over to one side. The dark coach
lunged on, heading directly toward the Darkus
haeton. Collision was imminent. She screamed,
anging her head from the windows. The rain beat

down unceasing violence, punctuated by the thunder of Mr. Grieg's whip.

And now, a kaleidoscope erupted in her nightmare.

Horses, coach wheels, Mondro's dead, cadaverous face, the gesturing sign language of those awesome hands, the spinning wheels, the lightning flashes. The universe coruscated like a pinwheel shooting sparks and rainwater. She tried to scream again, but the world was thick with soundlessness now, and all the mad images cavorted and danced. She felt herself flying, soaring through nothingness, but seeing the savage head-on meeting of Mr. Grieg's coach and the black phaeton.

She was lying on the roadway now. Wet, bruised, and limp. Lying in the beating rain watching the spinning wheels, the wildly fleeing horses, still trailing harness and splintered yokes.

And then, Count Darkus stood there. The coaches were gone. So were the horses. There was nothing. Just the rain, herself, and the tall, sinister figure of the Count standing in the mud and muck of the roadway. All else had vanished into oblivion.

He came toward her.

She saw his eyes. Burning, like the fires of hell. She could not see his face.

She drew back, still half-crouched, trying to

ollect the scattered pieces of her sanity. And still
e came on. Looming, stretching. His figure had
egun to expand. He raised his arms, the Inverness
loak falling like drapes over a window. His tall
gure seemed to grow before her very eyes. Chang-
ng shape, metamorphosing rapidly.

The twin burning embers of his eyes ignited the
aikness. Now she saw the face. The handsome
ace with its perfect mouth—which now opened.
loodred lips parted, and she saw the shocking,
ointed horror of his teeth! He came on, his arms
eginning to move up and down until his entire
ppearance began to assume the outline of a huge,
ionstrous winged creature. Until he began to
ook like a *bat*. . . .

She screamed.

This time she heard herself.

She woke up, screaming. . . .

THE DARKER PEOPLE

"I'm so glad you are feeling better, Miss Lindquist. Those dreadful people—whatever possesses them to behave so terribly to us?"

Lady Carmela Darkus, despite her words, was positively radiant. Her pale cheeks were blooming. A fresh vitality dominated her voice and gestures. She was a completely different sort of person from the frail, ethereal creature Rosalie had dined with on that memorable first night at Darkus Castle.

The new day had dawned at Darkus Castle. The Darkuses and their twice-unexpected guest were having coffee and sweetcakes in the study. Mondro had matrialized wordlessly and placed a tray on the sideboard. He departed always as silently as he came, a wraith. His eyes looked through Rosalie, as if neither of them had shared a savage ad-

venture on the crossroads leading into the village of Larkmore.

Or—a horrible nightmare.

Rosalie made no mention of her three ghostly visitors in the fog. She saw no reason to. It was better to play the innocent know-nothing, to ensure her own well-being, if her suspicions were correct. She was acutely ill at ease to see Lady Darkus so bubbling with fresh energy and strength. From her remembered storehouse of vampirical folklore, it was all too simple to recall how vampires battened on the blood of the living. Such as three young women from Larkmore . . .

She restrained a shudder, trying to smile, endeavoring to keep a polite face on as she listened to the vibrant chatter of the Count's wife. Indeed, Lady Darkus was at her very best today. An exquisite stomacher of dark and rich hues hugged her figure. Her beautiful face and flawless hands were like two lovely patches of white against a most becoming blackness of garb. The mother-of-pearl button motif was once more repeated. The Lady seemed to favor them.

Rosalie had remembered, too, to wear her crucifix *under* her shirtwaist. She did not want a repetition of the sad scene of that first night.

The weather once again was foul. Dark skies,

a threat of rain, and a heavy overcast. Rosalie had striven in vain to hear the birds in the trees lining the courtyard. But they had not sung their morning song. A positive sign of intemperate weather on the way.

Count Darkus had left the women to their coffee after breakfast. Rosalie missed him. A sensation implemented by the soft musical echoes of a harpsichord playing from somewhere down the hall.

"Is that the Count playing?"

"Yes." Lady Darkus fluttered a hand, still smiling despite her horror of the behavior of the villagers. "He's a virtuoso, really. There is no melody that is beyond him. Not even the classics. He plays *The Appassionata* to a fault."

"I believe you. That's Chopin he is rendering now. How marvelous." It was. The strains, tinkling and pure, stole down the passageway with subtle effect, finding the flung-wide doors and engulfing them.

Lady Darkus stirred.

"I still do not comprehend. Those three girls. Why should Larkmore suspect my Alexander of misdeeds when he is the noblest, kindest man I have ever known?"

Rosalie studied her hostess. There was no guile in the bewitching dark eyes. Only candor and sincerity. It was all too confusing. Surely, someone

here at the castle knew of the presence of the three maidens.

"I don't know, Lady Carmela. It is tragic that people think as they do in times like these. Had Mondro not acted so quickly, I don't know what might have happened."

Lady Darkus nodded. "He is invaluable, as both manservant and friend. I'll venture to say that these three young women have simply run away from home, seeking adventure. They'll come back, penitent and miserable, when they find that there is little of romance in life and more of hardship. The young idiots. To worry their blood relatives so—how irresponsible."

"Then you don't think some mischance has befallen them?"

"Not in the least. It is a lark. You'll see."

Rosalie shook her head. "No, no. I must this time continue on my journey. I'm overdue at this rate. My entire schedule has been altered. And I've imposed on your hospitality long enough."

"Nonsense, my dear. Stay as long as you like. I see so little of people shut up here. Alexander feels as I do. You are as refreshing as a breath of mountain air."

"You are too kind—both of you—really. But I must be gone. I'm sure the Larkmore villagers won't repeat their mistake."

Lady Darkus's eyes lidded. It was such an unusual expression that it arrested Rosalie's attention.

"Won't they, indeed? I wonder. You have great faith in the ultimate goodness of human nature, Miss Lindquist. I'm afraid you are too trusting in that."

"Perhaps I am."

Both women lapsed into a brief silence as if to enjoy the sound of the harpsichord filtering into the great hall. Now, thunder rumbled suddenly, drowning out the music. And when the blasting echoes had died to a whisper, it was obvious that the music had stopped too.

"That's odd," Lary Darkus murmured. "Alexander has broken off in the middle . . ."

"He doesn't wish to compete with the heavens," Rosalie said with a smile. "And I don't blame him. That was a very loud thunderclap."

Lady Darkus chuckled, her bosom surging.

As if taking counsel of her words, Darkus Castle was suddenly assailed by rain and storm. Great, pattering drops crashed against the high windows and the walls of the structure. Lightning flashed now, followed by more rocketing thunder. The heavens had opened up, and the slam of windows and the squeal of shutters could be heard all over the ground level as if Mondro had immediately set

himself the task of protecting Darkus Castle against the onslaught of the deluge.

"There," Lady Darkus nodded, confirming Rosalie's fears. "Mondro knows. When he goes about locking up like that, it means a bad storm is in the offing. I'm afraid you can go nowhere in weather like this."

"But I must!"

"And I say you cannot." Lady Darkus looked apologetic, coating it with a smile. "The roads and byways are quagmires when it rains. Surely you have noticed that? The Count wouldn't hear of you going in weather such as this."

"And so I would not, Carmela."

Rosalie spun in her chair as the voice of the Count sounded resonantly from the threshold of the room. He strode forward, his tall figure as familiar as ever. Her heart quickened with both fear and wonder. Was she imagining the satisfaction and happiness she sensed in his tone? As if he were happy that circumstances would compel her to stay on at Darkus for another twenty-four hours?

"Really, Count," she protested. "haven't I overstayed myself as it is? I appreciate this kindness, but my itinerary is in ruins as it is."

He waved a careless hand, taking up a position at the arm of his wife's baronial chair.

"Itineraries were made to be interrupted an perhaps broken, Miss Lindquist. It is not our do ing, you see. Fate and the gods dictate you remai here until it is time to move on."

Rosalie sruggled not to blurt her feelings. Al ready, a thin but grisly patina of doom was enfold ing her. She didn't want to stay another day a Darkus. Not with her mounting fears, suspicions and fancies, however groundless they might prov to be. She felt so lost, so lonely—so *manipulated* as if she were a puppet dancing on some master' strings. She sighed to hide her gloom and defeat

"Very well—I thank you. But again I feel s obtrusive."

"I won't hear of that," Count Darkus said firmly "You are an attractive woman of good heart an mind, and I for one am grateful to you for provid ing my Carmela with a much-needed social atmo sphere in this grim old collection of stones."

"You see, my dear?" Lady Darkus's voice ros in an amused laugh. "Exactly as I said. I told yo the Count would feel that way."

"The Count is as always . . . too kind," Rosali muttered, casting her eyes away.

"We shall speak no more of leaving," Coun Darkus said with a note of finality. "Hear the rain The country will be one massive mud bog by night

fall. Time enough in the morning to talk of moving on."

He was right, as usual. A cataract of water, crashing and shattering the ears, pounded on the castle. The latticed windows shuddered under a fresh torrent.

Lady Darkus sat back in her chair, her long, slender fingers toying with the gnarled arms of the piece. She regarded Rosalie with an affectionate smile.

"Have you ever thought of marriage, Miss Lindquist?"

What a curious time and place for such a query! Rosalie was pulled from her despair about her enforced stay at Darkus.

"Why, no."

"Surely there have been many men and many proposals?"

"I'm afraid not. I have been too busy with my schoolwork. I haven't thought much of the idea. I suppose when the time comes, I shall meet the proper man . . ."

"Do not wait too long." There was an abrupt, deep melancholy in Lady Darkus's voice. "Time waits on no man. And no woman."

"Yes, of course," Rosalie agreed, at a loss as to

what to say next. Count Darkus seemed to come to her rescue. Or was she imagining that too?

"You're not wearing your cameo, Carmela? I thought you had put it on this morning."

"Oh, but I am. I simply repinned it. See?"

Rosalie stared as Lady Carmela Darkus smilingly unfolded and parted a black lace shawl that had draped becomingly about her shoulders. Now she could see a wondrous brooch, of oval shape and amazingly brilliant, glowing from Lady Darkus's bosom. It was of black onyx with an exquisite cameo in bas-relief against the background of polished material.

"Ah, yes. Of course." Count Darkus chuckled. "I didn't think you had forgotten your intention to show it to Miss Lindquist."

"How lovely it is," Rosalie murmured. "I would indeed like to see it."

"Shall I unpin it, my dear? Or would you care just to come closer for a look?"

"Don't bother, please." Rosalie left her chair, approaching Lady Darkus. The woman inclined her head, seeming to thrust her bosom upward. Rosalie bent forward, examining the large brooch. It was indeed exquisite. She could see that the silhouette of a woman's head was surpassingly beautiful. It took one's breath away. She exhaled in wonder. "How beautiful she is!"

From behind her, Count Darkus said, "She was the most beautiful woman in the world, Miss Lindquist."

"But who is she?"

"My mother," Lady Darkus said with sad pride. "It is a cameo of my dear dead mother. I'm glad you like it."

The Count's wife was boldly close as she made this last remark. So much so that Rosalie, still bent forward in her examination of the remarkable cameo, looked up. Now her eyes met those of Lady Darkus. Her face was but inches away. With a shock that undulated all through her body, Rosalie was aware of the Lady's gaze. It was not on her face. The dark, sensuous eyes were focused almost hypnotically on the area of Rosalie's slender throat where it lay exposed above the collar of her shirtwaist.

Startled to the very core, she recoiled.

As if awakened from a deep trance, Lady Darkus blinked.

"Yes . . . ?" she murmured in a remote, faraway voice.

"It is nothing," Rosalie said, straightening. "I was just so struck by the beauty of the piece."

"Oh." Lady Darkus smiled, fondling the cameo lovingly. "I must keep it with me always. To ward off evil spirits and bring good luck."

"Yes," Rosalie agreed. "It is a thing of beauty. Surely the work of the Lord."

"Amen to that," said Count Darkus. "May I pour you both some more coffee? This beastly weather will not allow us to go outdoors."

Thunder blasted anew, rattling the frame of the building. Eaves sighed, and shutters banged again. Rosalie returned to her chair, trying to still the budding terror in her breast. There was no mistake now. There couldn't be. She had not *imagined* that Lady Darkus was staring at her throat, as if measuring it for softness and utility. It was all so horrifying. So terrible.

How could she be mistaken in the face of all this evidence?

Lady Carmela Darkus was tainted. Accursed. There was something very wrong with her. There had to be, else all her weird actions were completely unaccountable and irrational.

"You look pale, Miss Lindquist," Count Darkus said in a low, almost velvety purr. "Are you feeling well?"

"Yes, I'm all right, thank you. I suspect I'm still a bit weak from my bump on the head, In fact, if you don't mind, I should like to go to my room if I may."

"Certainly you may. Can I fetch you anything?"

"No, no. I'm fine. Well, I shall see you both later."

Count Darkus nodded, his brooding face a mask. Lady Darkus smiled her dazzling smile. Rosalie bore toward the doorway, making her goodbyes as she left the room.

Her heart was chilled, and all the way up the curving stone staircase to her bedchamber, she had the uncomfortable sensation that she was being watched.

By whom?

And why?

She didn't know.

Which was the most frightening thing of all.

Her empty bedchamber, with its lack of pleasant furnishings, chilled her. The room was so forlorn and desolate. The heavy velveteen draps clung like funeral shrouds to the casements. The fury of the building storm set the very candlelight in the room to dancing. The day was darkening again into one of those long, dreadfully dismal times she had come to expect in these haunted, macabre hills. Since that very first outing on the terrible Karlopian Pass, she had had nothing but sensations of uneasiness and dread. Now they had all come full cycle, climaxed by the violence of the angry and

shocking assault of the men of Larkmore, who had tried to sieze the coach and harm her and Mondro

What in the name of God did it all truly mean

Why should the Darkus family be held in such terrible reputation?

Count Darkus—was he a man or indeed, a fiend? A vampire? Lady Darkus—why had she looked so fiendish and ugly as Rosalie studied the cameo?

Mondro—a deaf-mute. How had he become so?

Darkus Castle—so vague, so shadowed, so steeped in age-old terrors and superstitutions.

None of which she had any answers for

She was trapped. Trapped in Darkus Castle.

And she might never leave the place at all. . .

MONDRO

The storm did not abate.

Indeed, the heavens might have opened up with the intention of deluging the universe. It was quite like Judgment Day visited upon the earth. Now the hills, the mountains, the surrounding countryside were lost in a sea of darkness. The trees were walls and solid shadows, the craggy tors stark and ugly as the mists and vapors closed over Darkus Castle. It was impossible to tell the hour of the day.

Huddling in her bedchamber, too upset to seek out anyone to talk to, Rosalie paced the floor. She was nervous and greatly agitated. Her body was cold, her senses were numb. A great, terrible uneasiness dominated her spirit. Who could she turn to in this queer house? Who of all them was in reality a friend to be trusted? There was so much that needed explaining.

She had lighted the candles on entering the room. Vagrant drafts of air, probably entering through cracks in the ancient stone, caused the flames to flutter. The candles flickered, threatening to go out. The eerie candlelight cast wavering shadows on the walls.

Rosalie sought some mental balm in the Bible but she could not concentrate. Not even Father Luigi's book could keep the fine print from running together. The words held no meaning right now. Not in this house, this place, where evil perhaps held dominion of a strange and terrible nature. If only she could relay her fears to the Count himself; if she could trust him and tell him of the three weird figures she had seen in the courtyard below. But what if he were directly involved? What if he was the evil itself? The thought made her tremble anew. She would be playing right into his hands!

It was a horrifying notion, one that made her shake all over. She tried to steel herself with reason. Vampires! Surely, it was not possible. How could such things be? Here on the very eve of a new century of enlightenment and progress—how monstrous it would be to lend credence and faith to such devil's work.

No, no. It was only her overwrought imagination again; the trip had been fraught with misad

venture, narrow escapes from death or worse, and she was but reacting with maidenly distress. How foolish it would all seem when she was back in America, lecturing in the classrooms once more. On those sunny shores, madness and superstition would not stand up for inspection in the light of day.

More thunder and lightning rolled and blasted the countryside. The candles flickered once more. Rosalie repressed a groan of fear and tried to collect her faltering equanimity of mind and purpose.

Another night in this creepy old castle and she might go mad herself. With the Count and his wife and Mondro for company. What a bizarre assemblage. Lady Darkus most of all. Rosalie was convinced she had seen what she had seen. That lidded look, the parted red lips showing white teeth—had they been pointed?—during the incident of the cameo brooch.

Could the people of Larkmore be correct? Had they good reason to point the finger of accusation at Darkus Castle? Those women—the girls—were they truly here now, somewhere in the house, hiding? Again, Rosalie's flesh crawled. How repulsive and revolting. Vampires and young, innocent maidens . . .

Suddenly, she could bear her loneliness no longer. Better to be downstairs, in the study, before

a great, roaring fire than to feel so cut off from the world up here. Grimly, she took her woolen shawl from the counterpane and drew it about her shoulders. She felt so cold and miserable. Extinquishing the candles quickly with the metal rod provided for that purpose, she left the room. She closed the door from the outside, locking it with a key. She did not dare to leave the bedchamber unlocked. When she came back, she wanted to enter a room that she knew no one could possibly have entered in her absence.

Lightning flashed in the windows of the passageway, illuminating the area with silvery reflections of light. She hurried along the hall, trying not to run. There was a somber stillness to the castle, despite the echoes of the storm. And the rain still hammered down with ceaseless violence. Shutters slammed and rattled, eaves strained, and ancient walls sighed.

She had no idea what the hour was. Darkus Castle seemed to hold no clocks or timepieces. She could not recall ever having heard a toll of bells or chimes.

As she headed for the master staircase, she was suddenly aware of a subtle change in the shadows there, She halted, her hand flying to her mouth to stifle an outcry.

Her way was blocked. The tall, incredible height

of Mondro stood at the top of the stairs, barring her passage. She would have to walk around him to descend. Or he would have to continue on his way or step aside. She suddenly realized, with that sharp stab of terror which recognizes a threat, that Mondro had no intention of so doing.

He was rooted to the place where he stood, long arms dangling at his sides, his expressionless face staring at her. Rosalie, not wishing to show her terror, tried to mask it with a smile.

But he was mute, he could not speak. Yet his eyes and his expression now told her many things. The hair at the nape of her neck rose in horror.

He had been drinking. Heavily. She could now hear his heavy, raspy breathing. The slight sway of his big body was unnerving. He was flexing his horned, knuckled fingers, and his slitted eyes were traveling over her face and form with an incredibly naked lust that no amount of innocence on Rosalie's part could have misinterpreted. Her blood chilled, and she drew back.

Wordlessly, Mondro took a step forward. He held out his arms. They came up slowly, enormous things, reaching for her as if he wished to embrace her.

"No." Rosalie found her voice, whimperingly. "You mustn't . . . Mondro, please . . . we're friends aren't we. . . ?"

The plea died on her lips. He had read her lips but now a ghastly, idiotic smile showed on hi face. His skin gleamed wetly in the half-light o the passageway. Behind him, long shadows ex tended up the staircase. He lurched forward, hi tiny eyes batting rapidly, as if he was trying t clear his head of the drink he had consumed. Sh could smell the coarse, stale odor of alcohol.

She wanted to scream and run, but she couldn't The giant's powerful presence mesmerized her.

There was nowhere to hide. Even if she turne and fled, he would reach her with but one strid of his elongated body. Those awful hands of hi . . . She shuddered. The world had taken one mor unbelievable dip toward insanity. The gentle Mon dro, Count Darkus's trusted manservant, who ha saved her from the hands of an angry, violent mob had now been transformed into a beast in huma form. Dear God . . .

"Mondro," she gasped, trying to find refug behind a pillar of stone along the ballustrade tha lined the passageway. "Please—go back. Let m pass. You don't know what you're doing."

His answer was another leer and a wave of hi right arm. Then he sprang forward, arms out stretched to engulf her. The crazed glare of hi eyes was vividly etched in another flash of light ning flooding the windows.

Rosalie screamed.

She would never forget the amazing scene that followed immediately upon the heels of her scream. The echoes of her fright were still reverberating from the rafters, and Mondro had closed in on her. Foul-smelling, hoarsely panting, his great arms crushing her. She fled from his grasp, only to be seized up again as easily as some child. She struggled, but Mondro bent her back against the pillar, his raw, crude hands tearing at her bodice. His fingers dug cruelly into her flesh. She tried to scream again, but this time his huge right hand shut down over her mouth. Her eyes closed. She felt as if the world, all topsy-turvy and insane, had indeed come to an end.

And then she heard the voice that would echo through all eternity. It came like a shout from the battlements.

"MONDRO!"

And abruptly, the giant no longer held her. He released her, or rather he seemed to, and she sagged against the cold stone support of the pillar. Through dimming, startled eyes she saw the angry, shocked face of Count Darkus bobbing beyond Mondro's shoulder.

Utterly incapacitated now, spent and limp with terror, she looked on as Count Darkus and Mondro locked in a terrifying struggle. A closed-in

combat that gave neither man very much room t
maneuver.

Count Darkus, his dark coat flung to one sid
was warily circling his giant manservant. Sh
could see the misery and intent in his eyes. H
bronzed, aristocratic fingers were raised like ta
ons. And Mondro, dazed, drunk and breathin
hoarsely, no longer able to recognize friend or fo
hurled himself at his master.

In a mad moment, they were meshed togethe
reeling, staggering, waltzing in the passageway
fighting for survival. Horrified, unable to speak o
move, Rosalie could only look on.

It was a terrible ordeal. A savage encounter.

And only Mondro's drink-drugged reflexes gav
the advantage to the sober, purposeful Cou
Darkus. Had the giant been sure of his senses, h
could have crushed his master like an eggshell.

Darkus knew that and he made good use of th
knowledge. With the skill of a dancing master an
one not unfamiliar with the art of the foil, the ta
Count lashed out sharply with his booted foot. Th
tip of his shoe crashed into Mondro's cadaverou
shank. The giant shook his head, stumbling, bend
ing at the ankle in agony. At exactly that oppo
tune moment, Count Darkus moved in for th
coup de grâce.

He closed his hands into a double fist and swun

them in a wide parabola of speed and muscular fury. The hollow sound of a bone snapping in the giant's jaw filled Rosalie's ears with horror. The combined weight and angle of the Count's killing blow, which would indeed have killed a lesser man, sent Mondro sprawling, face-down, full-length on the floor. Even then, he sought to raise himself, shaking his huge, shaggy head in confusion.

But the Count was merciless. He chopped one more savage, vicious punch to the back of Mondro's neck where the wide shoulders parted. The giant jerked spasmodically and collapsed. He was still.

Breathing hard, Count Darkus stared down at him for one long moment. A moment compounded of bitterness, regret, and sadness.

Then he stepped quickly toward Rosalie, his dark face lined with concern and ill humor.

"I heard your scream."

She nodded, still unable to speak.

"He's been drinking heavily. But he doesn't as a rule. I do not understand this. Are you all right, Miss Lindquist? If he has harmed you in any way, I'll have the skin off his back!"

She felt his strong arms supporting her. Her hands fell across his wide chest. His face was close to her own. She saw the deep, sad eyes, the trou-

bled mouth. His smooth, sleek hair was tumblin
a long curl down his wide brow.

"I'm all right now, Count. Poor Mondro. I'
sure he didn't know what he was doing."

"You are being charitable again," he sai
harshly. "When will you learn to hate? Hate har
and well! Must you always suffer fools so gladly
Mondro is a simple man, diseased now with drink
but that does not condone his actions, does it?"

She was astounded by his heat of speech, th
latent fury of his thoughts.

"No," she stammered. "But there must be som
explanation for it."

Count Darkus glared down at the recumben
Mondro.

"Come. Let him sleep it off there. Come down
stairs with me to the fire. I'll give you a port. Care
ful, now. You seem unsteady."

She was. She had taken one step and tottered
Once more, his strong hand supported her, right
ing her.

"And Lady Carmela?" Rosalie asked gently.

Count Darkus frowned as he guided her towar
the landing. He waited for a blast of thunder t
fade away before replying.

"I don't know where she's got to. She is not i
her room. Perhaps she will be below now. Wit

all this disturbance, I'm sure we have roused her from whatever she was doing."

"Count . . ." Rosalie hesitated, biting her lip.

"Yes?"

"It is nothing."

He laughed harshly, urging her down the stone stairs, his hand cupped over hers. It was a tingling sensation. His fingers and palm were so strong, so masculine.

"Come now. You are troubled. I can see that. Unless I am a fool, you were troubled from that very first night. By this house, by me, by my manservant and my oh so strange wife. Admit it, Miss Lindquist. Stop playing the patient schoolmistress with me. There is much about Darkus that perplexes you. Confess it."

"All right, I shall. Yes. There is much about this house I do not understand."

"Good, fine. We make progress." At the very base of the staircase, he turned to look at her. Shadows darkened his face. The main hall was alive with shadows. The baroque furniture, the suit of armor, the tall cases. "Now tell me. Do you imagine in all your wisdom and reason that I am perhaps a—*vampire?*"

There. He had said it. He voiced the unvoiceable. The notion too terrible to be borne.

He waited for her reply, not moving on to the study, where the blazing hearth roared.

She looked at him, met his eyes. Her chin tilted She was not afraid of this man. Somehow, in some indelible way, she had never been.

"Are you a vampire, Count Darkus?"

He looked surprised that she had answered him with a query of her own. His brow darkened, his lips curled, and the gleam of his eyes was wary almost challenging.

"What would you say, Miss Lindquist, if I told you—"

Before he could finish his sentence, there was a eruption of sound directly outside the castle. But it was not the voice of the storm or the crash of the heavens.

There was a mighty cannonade of violence, and the heavy oaken portals of Darkus Castle shuddered under the onslaught of force being exerted from without the walls.

"Darkus!" a Stentorian boom cut through the bedlam of the day. "We've come for you, you devil! And this time there's no stopping the hand of God!"

LARKMORE SPEAKS

For a long, terrible moment, Count Darkus stood still. His tall body shuddered as if from some inner storm. Then with hardly a glance in Rosalie's direction, he raced to the entrance of Darkus Castle, taking up a position to the left of the massive doors. Here, a stone niche in the wall, grilled and windowed, permitted him to peer out into the night. Even as he did so, there came the shattering, pounding violence of a battering ram being propelled against the great doors. The wood groaned and buckled in protest.

The Count shook his head and, without turning, beckoned to Rosalie to come see for herself. Like an automaton she obeyed him, but her heart was thumping violently.

"They have come," Count Darkus muttered.

"The fools. In all their glory. Look for yourself, Miss Lindquist."

"But what does it mean? Why do they come here—?"

"The Bible proclaims the vengeance, my dear. An eye for an eye. A tooth for a tooth."

Fearfully, she looked through the niche. Her mind recoiled at what her eyes saw. Despite the severity of the rainstorm, torchlight glared from without. She say the crazed villagers of Larkmore, recognizing many of the angry faces from the scene at the crossroads where the phaeton had been halted. It was the same wild mob. Armed with clubs, on horseback, shouting and yelling. Their hoarse cries were an odd medley against the background of lashing rain. Some of the men were already dismounted, bearing a huge oak beam with which they were assaulting the main door. Again came the battering of the ram. Rosalie trembled, turning to the Count. She was amazed to see that he now bore two dueling pistols, cocked and ready. He had obviously been wearing them on his person, under the dark coat. His hawk's face was savagely determined in the feeble light of the hall. His mouth was a bitter line of regret.

"If this is to be my last stand . . ." He shrugged. "Go to your room. Find the Lady Carmela. I shall do my best to keep you both from harm."

"No, no." She shook her head firmly. "I can explain to them. What they think is ridiculous. They look like Godfearing men. I'm sure I can make them see that what they are doing is wrong."

As crucial as the moment was, even as the battering ram now thrust through the wood, splintering and tearing, Count Darkus smiled at her almost affectionately. A great roar of triumph went up. The ram withdrew from the splintered door, ready for one last thrust of execution. Entrance of the mob would be a matter of moments. Count Darkus level the two pistols at the yielding doors.

"Would you argue with these idiots, Miss Lindquist? When they are convinced in their souls they are right? No, I say. Get back or I shall not be responsible for your safety."

"I shall stay here," she said, "whatever may happen. You have been good and kind to me. I mean to help you."

"God bless you—you are an idiot too. Stay—there goes the door!"

He swept her back with him, encircling her waist with one arm, guns trained on the door. From where they stood, they looked almost in fascination at the spectacle of man-made things surrendering to man-made destruction. The battering ram prodded inward, again and again, until with one last positive thrust, the barriers split asunder.

Through the yawning wreckage of the door, a horde of rain-soaked, torch-bearing men flooded through the hall. Count Darkus cried a command.

The lead man of the violent mob, seeing him, pointed a brawny arm of accusation. *"There he is! The Lord has saved him for our vengeance!"* Rosalie shrank behind the Count's tall figure. There was no time for wise words, counsels or discussion. The mob streamed forward as one man, flowing, pushing, yelling. Count Darkus fired one of his twin pistols. Some inner charitableness of the man made him fire above the heads of the mob, else he surely would have killed one man of Larkmore with his first discharge. But no one saw the charity or understood it. Not even this mob bearing wooden crosses.

Within one mad moment, Count Darkus and Rosalie were engulfed. Buried under a sea of windmilling arms and faces. The terrible din of shouting continued, drowning out the sounds of the storm.

Rosalie would never forget the fury and unleashed violence of the next few minutes. Rough hands, hardly mindful that she was a defenseless woman, had seized her person and dragged her into the study. Count Darkus was literally lifted in a forest of arms and borne aloft with her. The darkened walls of the castle with its faded glories

spun madly. The ceiling, staircase, and floor were a shifting panorama before her frightened eyes. She felt herself on the brink of collapse. She could hear the fierce grunts of the men carrying her, smell their damp, dirty clothes. Oaths and curses filled her ears. And through it all, she was keenly aware that she was on the very threshold of her death.

In the baronial study with its lovely paintings and ornaments, she looked on dumbly as her fate unfolded. Count Darkus was prostrated on the long oaken table, his arms and legs pinioned by four stout men. She herself was flung into one of the high-backed chairs. A grim, scowling man stood watch over, a pitchfork clutched menacely in his thick hands. All the men milled about now, quieting down a bit, but the angry muttering continued. Terrified. Rosalie tried to catch Count Darkus's eyes, but he was prone on the table, his profile facing the dark ceiling overhead.

"Come on, Bill," someone eyelled. "We got 'em now. What's next for them?"

This sudden question was greeted by a chorus of ayes and complaining foices. Rosalie tried to speak, but she couldn't. Fear and terror had stopped her tongue.

Now, the leader stood forward from the mob. He was a tall, rough-looking man clad in deer-

skin garments held together by a length of rawhide at his waist. A brown slouch hat shaded his eyes, but his face was a lined, seamy mask of vengeance. He held up his hands for silence. One of those hands held a club, a gnarled length of hickory.

"I'll tell you what's next," he snarled. "We must find out what this devil did with those lasses."

This too was greeted with approval.

The tall man nodded. "And I'll find that out right now, or my name isn't Bill Ballander." He took a step toward the table, gripping his club firmly, his attention leveled at the prone Count Darkus, who was not trying to struggle free of the restraining hands of the four men who held him.

Now Ballander paused, looking at Rosalie. His face tightened. He poked a bony forefinger. "You," he rumbled. "Who are you and what are you doing here in this devil's house?"

Rosalie found her voice. Perhaps she could reason with this man, talk to him. Tell him that what they thought, what they might contemplate doing, was nothing but a dreadful mistake.

Hastily, stammering, she poured forth her story. Explaining how kind the Count had been and her good fortune to have found such a hospitable gentleman on a perilous journey.

When she had done, Ballander's scowl had only

deepened. His fellow villagers had sneered and made sarcastic comment all through Rosalie's account of her stay at Darkus Castle. The ones bearing wooden crucifixes waved them, jeeringly.

"Schoolmistress, eh? Then you should have more sense. This Darkus is a vampire. A devil. A blood sucker. And by God, we've got him now, but first he must tell us where those three young girls are. If he's harmed them, we'll roast him in hell."

"Girls?" Rosalie shook her head. "I have been here. I would have seen them. Wasn't I on the roadway last night when you people attacked the coach? Surely I would know. I tell you they are not here!" She could not have explained, even to herself, why she was lying to save the life of Count Darkus. She saw him stir on the oaken table. A villager grunted and smashed the Count's hand brutally down on the table. The Count uttered not a sigh to show he had been hurt. Rosalie's temper flared. "You call yourself men? Fathers, parents? How can you come into this man's home like this, like savages, and accuse him with no proofs or evidence? Dear God, don't make a tragic blunder. If you harm the Count and he is innocent, what will you answer to your Maker then? How will you atone for your guilt?"

Her words rang true and clear. She saw more

than one face digest her words and take pause. But in the end, it was Ballander again who held sway over these people.

"Don't listen to this goody," he snarled. "Make the Count tell us what we want to know."

"Aye! Aye!" chorused his followers.

Suddenly, Ballander whirled. "That dummy—Mondro. And the Count's wife. In the excitement, we've forgotten them. Some of you run to find them. They're as much a part of this as this schoolmistress is. They may know about the lasses. Hurry, now. Before we begin our pleasure with the Count."

Footfalls raced off, accompanied by brandishing torches and vindictive shouts, but Rosalie watched the man Ballander. He ignored her now and approached the oaken table that held Count Darkus.

Ballander leaned on his club and stared down at the rigid, unafraid profile facing the ceiling. "Darkus. Can you hear me?"

"Yes, Mr. Ballander."

"There's no use denying anything. You'll not convince me otherwise. I know you for what you are. A man from hell who walks at night, biting throats and sucking blood. So don't waste your breath saying no to that."

"Of course not, Mr. Ballander."

Ballander almost smiled, peering down curiously at the regal calm of his prisoner.

"You're a cool one, Darkus. I'll hand you that much. But a brave front and no matter what face you put on isn't going to fool me or any of the men in this room. Tell you what, though. You tell us where those three girls are, and it'll be easier for you in the end."

Count Darkus said, "I do not know anything of these girls you mentioned, other than what Miss Lindquist told me when she returned from the crossroads."

"Don't keep on lying, Darkus!"

"As you wish, Mr. Ballander. But it is the truth all the same. God's truth, if you will."

There was an angry rumbling from the throng of men crowding the room. Ballander held them back with a big hand.

"Don't take the Lord's name in vain, you heathen." He pressed forward again, leaning over the Count. "Where are those girls, I say? Tell us or we'll rip the black heart from your filthy carcass!"

Rosalie closed her eyes, feeling faint. The whole tableau was a scene from the darkest pit, banked with dark fires and soulless bodies. Surely, this couldn't be happening!

But time only lent credence to the swift passage

of terror. More shouts and angry cries, and now came Lady Darkus, dragged protesting into the room. Her long dark hair was in disarray; her black bodice revealed a rent where her full bosom heaved. Her lovely face showed the smudged stains of soot and cinders as if she had been found hiding in some chimney flue. At sight of Rosalie and the Count, her eyes goggled and her mouth formed a wail or terror. The men behind her pushed her farther into the study, sending her sprawling, with no concern for her femininity on her station in life.

Count Darkus writhed on the oaken table, but the four men held him fast. The Count's booted feet drummed helplessly on the oak.

"You fools. Can't she be let alone? Can't you see she is ill? As God is my judge, she is a sick, miserable woman. Are you trying to drive her insane with such treatment? Leave her be, I say—or I'll seek out every one of you for satisfaction."

"Alexander," Lady Carmela whimpered from the floor. "Miss Lindquist . . ."

Ballander ignored her cries. He frowned at the men who had brought her. "Where's that dummy?" he demanded. "Can't have him running around free—"

"Not a hair of him, Bill," one of the men rasped. "He must have seen us coming and run away."

"Don't sound like him," Ballander rumbled. "Not the way he handled us yesterday. Still, you could be right." He whirled to add to the threat he made to Count Darkus, when suddenly his attention riveted on Lady Darkus. Rosalie saw the abrupt change of Ballander's face, and her eyes, as terrified as she was, flew to Lady Carmela Darkus.

Lady Darkus was still on the stone floor, half-crouching, a pathetic, forlorn figure. But something gleamed from the black bodice, directly to the left of the vicious tear in her dress. The cameo. The lovely brooch that Rosalie had examined earlier.

But there was no explanation for what the sight of the object did to Ballander and one of the rougher-seeming men in that assembly of half-crazed villagers. This man came forward, trembling, his oak club raised, his eyes wide with wonder. Hoarsely, he pointed to the cameo at Lady Darkus's throat, and a great sob escaped him.

"There's the proof," he roared. "That pin belongs to my Wandra! A gift from her grandparents! Where is she, you devils?" He rushed to Count Darkus, thrusting his club into the face below him. "Tell me, you devil, before we ram stakes into your blood-sucking hearts!"

Ballander dropped his club to the stone floor,

nodding grimly. He probed into his deerhide jacket and produced two long lengths of wood. They were tapered to sharp, vicious points. Looking on, Rosalie paled. Even Lady Darkus, from the depths of the cold floor, blanched. And Count Darkus, craning his head now, shuddered violently, trying to lash out at the men who held him down.

Ballander held up the sharp lengths of wood. His face was cold and cruel in the torchlight of the hall.

"These," he said hollowly, "will be driven into your black hearts. All three of you. We have no room fot vampires in this country. Now, tell us what you have done with those girls—or we will kill you right now!"

The hall rang with the harsh judgment of his words.

THE LAST BATTLE

At this turning point in the tangled lives of all who stood in the great hall of Darkus Castle, there was an interruption. An unexpected, timely one, to be sure, but in the end, to no immediate avail.

As Ballander stood over Count Darkus's prostrate figure, raising the pointed stakes to show them in all their wicked appearance, there was a hoarse shout from the threshold of the study. Men standing there leaped back, waving their clubs.

Mondro had appeared, like a ghost from the graveyard, materializing like a gigantic avenging angel of justice. As shocked and frightened as she was, Rosalie thrilled to his entrance.

He was obviously no longer intoxicated; the fumes had worn off, and now Mondro could see and be conscious only that his beloved master and mistress were in great danger.

He must have recovered where he lay in the corridor upstairs and deaf as he was, realized the situation. If he could have given voice to his wrath, Rosalie was certain he would have howled like a triumphant banshee as he hurled himself into the room. Not even Ballander, as tall and stout as he was, could be a match for Mondro.

The great arms flailed, the long legs kicked, and the Larkmore villagers scattered like chaff in a grain chute. Clubs and torches were raised against him to block his passage, to bring him down. But the silent giant, coordinating like a truly marvelous machine might have been Samson among the Philistines.

His blocky clenched fists dealt resounding blows and punches. The village men sailed backward, pummeled into senselessness. Ballander tried to howl for a concerted move against the giant, but no one had the time to listen. In an instant, Mondro had gained the center of the room and unseated two of the men who held Count Darkus down to the oaken table. Count Darkus responded perfectly. He shot erect, striking out with both hands, and his two remaining captors fell down in a combined position of unconsciousness. The Count leaped to the floor, his back to his manservant. Together, they formed a solid wall of defense. The Larkmore mob tried to surround

them, to close them off by sheer weight of numbers, but it was useless. With mighty Mondro as his partner and his own quick muscular reflects to serve him, Count Darkus commanded the fight. Ballander, growling angrily like a lion, moved forward, swinging his stout hickory club. Mundro booted it from his fingers and followed with a level arm thrust forward. Ballander crashed to the stone floor, his slouch hat sailing, his body rolling.

Rosalie gazed on in admiration and wonder, her heart soaring; the Count and Mondro were like two giants of old, legends of living and breathing strength and Herculean goodness. How could the forces of evil win out over such men?

She had her answer in a moment.

Like Achilles, the Count had a heel, a spot where he was vulnerable. In his case, it was Lady Carmela Darkus. One of the plucky Larkmore men had managed to seize Lady Darkus by her long, dark hair and pull her erect while most of the intense fighting was underway. In a flash, he had drawn a short dirk and placed it against Lady Darkus's white throat. She tried to twist out of his grasp, but the villager held her fast.

"Darkus!" bellowed this man. "I'll cut your wife's throat if you don't surrender!"

As heated and hurried as the fighting was, the Count heard him. Possibly, Mondro saw and did

not hear. But the sight was ample. Even Mondro, with one big bound, would not be able to reach the dirk in time to divert it from its purpose. He looked confused.

Suddenly Count Darkus dropped his hands.

Baffled but understanding, Mondro did likewise. All about them, the floor of the hall was filled with prostrate figures, fallen Larkmore townspeople. The grim few that were still on their feet swooped forward, overwhelming Count Darkus and Mondro. Rapidly, leather thongs and bindings were produced.

This time the Count was lashed to the oaken table, ankles and wrists. Mondro was bound fast to one of the straight-backed baronial chairs. As for Lady Carmela and Rosalie, Ballander, groggy but erect, ordered his men to fasten their hands behind their backs and stand them to either side of the table so they could bear witness to the horror that was about to be perpetrated.

The men were breathing hard now, no longer cursing and swearing. Ballander had no need to ask for a decision, a judgment; it was implicit in the stony faces all around him. Rosalie closed her eyes. This then was truly the end—the triumph of ignorance and superstition over the truth.

Ballander wordlessly reached down, bending over the Count, and ripped away his now torn

waistcoat. He clawed at the silken ruffles of the shirt, pulling hard. Fabric tore with a hissing sound. Count Darkus's chest, bronze and muscular, lay exposed in the torchlight. Ballander's cold smile was death itself. Quietly, methodicaly, his right hand, which held on of the viciously pointed stakes, placed it directly over the Count's heart. And then his left hand came into view. In its closed fingers was the handle of a medium-sized maul. Ballander poised, balancing the mallet in his hand. All around the table, throughout the great hall, everyone now could hear the voice of the storm. It had not lessened at all. Rain whipped at the casement shutters in a frenzy. The torchlight wavered, lending a satanic aura to the face of Ballander, who was probably, in his heart, a good man.

Rosalie, unable to keep her eyes closed, gasped out one last despairing plea for mercy and common sense.

"Stop," she begged. "This is ungodly. Wicked. You can't condemn this man without benefit of judge, jury, or trial. How can you take this justice into your own hands? What can I say to you to make you see that what you are about to do is wrong—is against God himself?"

Ballander paused. "So say you. We say otherwise. You're new to these parts. You know noth-

ing of Darkus, the evil eye that is over this place. All the innocent people that disappeared down through the years, never to be heard or seen again. This devil was at work. Well, now we will put a stop for final good and all. How many more lasses have to disappear before we act?"

Rosalie gazed at him, incredulous. "People run away, leave their homes, for all sorts of reasons. Why do you make it out as the work of vampires? There are no such things as vampires! Are you all simple-minded children that I must convince you of that? The Count is a flesh-and-blood person, even as you and I. Touch him. feel him, surely your own senses will tell you he is a mortal man!"

"Save your words, Miss. And say some prayers of your own. We are going to rid this Pass of this devil forever. And you can join him in hell."

"But you can't—you mustn't. It's sinful!"

"That it is," Ballander said meaningfully, poising the stake over Count Darkus's heart, "and there is no more to be said." The stake was in place. Ballander raised the mallet slowly. Every man and woman in the hall held his breath; their eyes were all fixed hypnotically on the hand that held the mallet.

Count Darkus suddenly laughed in his chest. A thin, mocking, ironic sound.

Ballander halted, mallet in midair. It was incon-

ceivable to him that a doomed man could find anything amusing in his very last moment on earth.

"Something you want to say, Darkus? If there is, say it. It's Christian to allow you a last word. But nothing blasphemous, mind. No curses or oaths, or I'll cut you off right in the middle of the first foul word!"

His followers strained forward, peering, waiting to hear what Count Alexander Darkus would say, so they could store it as a nugget of gossip and wonder for the years of story telling to come. To have killed an actual vampire would enrich all their dull, meaningless lives.

"I only wanted to thank Miss Lindquist for her belief in me. And for her attempts to save my life. Also, you must not harm Miss Lindquist. She is a stranger to these parts and a very fine woman. It matters little to me what you do to me in your sublime ignorance, but you must let Miss Lindquist live!"

Lady Carmela Darkus whimpered at his words. "Alexander, Alexander—forgive me, please. I didn't mean this to happen . . ."

"It is all right, my dear," he said in a quiet, level voice. "You didn't know what you were doing. It is not my right to judge you. As it is not the right of these misguided men of God to judge us."

A townsman, impatient for blood, growled,

"Kill him, Ballander! What are you waiting for? Do it now!"

Mondro, mute and helpless, struggled against the lashings of his chair. A great sadness now dominated his cadaverous face. The poor giant seemed to be crying. Moisture gleamed in his eyes.

Ballander nodded. From without, the fury of the storm hammered violently aginst the walls of Darkus Castle.

"A lovely sound," Count Darkus murmured. "The honesty of the elements has always been soothing to me. Do as you feel you must, Mr. Ballander. And may God have mercy on your immortal soul."

This clearly was not what the earthly Ballander expected from the lips of a vampire. He hesitated, a look of fear passing over his face. He shuddered, the hand holding the stake twitching.

"What's that? God, you say—you call on God to judge me, Darkus?"

"And why not, pray? You believe in him, do you not?"

"Yes, but—you don't! You're a vampire, and what does a vampire have to do with the Lord?"

"I am a man," Darkus almost whispered. "I am not a vampire. That is my final statement before God and these witnesses. Now, do your worst."

"Kill him! Kill him!" chanted the angry voices surrounding the table. "He's lying to save himself, can't you see that, Bill?" This last was muttered by the impatient man close to the table, whose voice now held some doubt of its own.

Ballander tensed, a great struggle going on inside him. He had expected maledictions, curses, threats—not this invoking of the heart of the same God he prayed to every Sunday in the town church. He was perplexed. Perspiration stood out on his seamed brow.

"The lasses, Darkus," he begged now. "Tell where the girls are, and I'll spare you."

"I cannot," Count Darkus said. "For I do not know."

Lady Carmela stirred, her eyes awakening, her bosom rising. "Alexander, don't you trust me? Do you think I would know and not tell to save your life?"

Rosalie experienced a spasm of hope. The change in Ballander's intent, his sudden doubt, the way the hammer wavered in his hand, were like a beacon of hope in a wilderness of despair. She leaped into the breach before the subtle tenor of the room changed and all was irreparably lost. Count Darkus must not die. Not now. Not for a lie.

"Lady Carmela," she asked quickly. "Where did you get the cameo? Please. Say now how you came by it before it is too late. Your husband's life is in the balance!"

Lady Carmela looked puzzled. She batted her eyelashes, and a frown wrote itself across her smudged face.

"The cameo? It's mine. My mother's—you saw. You heard the Count, my husband, tell you, didn't you? How can you ask me such a question at a time like this—?"

"Yours?" roared the man who had singled the brooch out in the first place. "You demons! That brooch is my daughter Wandra's. If it's here, then she must be! Where have you hidden her? What have you done to my little girl?" He broke off, sobbing, fists clenched, his body trembling.

Ballander was now in a state of thorough indecision. The mad fury and rage that had brought him to Darkus Castle at the head of a righteous, angry mob were now dissipated almost completely. Only his latent sense of duty kept him where he was, ready to drive a stake through a vampire's heart.

"Hold on, now, all of you," he rumbled. "This wants some thinking. If you know where those girls got to, Lady Darkus, you'd better be telling. No matter what you've done. These men are be-

side themselves with grief worrying about their kin."

Lady Carmela drew herself up proudly, despite the leather thongs that bound her."

"I know of no girls, sir."

"Then you leave us no other choice. God be kind to you, Darkus. I do now what must be done."

And now the stake was in place again, the mallet raised high to the rafters of the room. Rosalie felt herself falling off into a great bottomless well of darkness. This was the end of sanity, reason, and golden flowering godliness. Count Darkus was to be murdered by a pack of brutes who had not the sense to understand why he was different from them.

He would pay for that difference with his life.

Her lips formed a soundless prayer. The torchlight, the storm, the mural of faces all around her blended into one insane tapestry of fantasy and violence. She saw the mallet descend, swiftly. Ballander drove it down hard as if speed and intensity of purpose would blot out the indecision that had already cost him his own peace of mind.

Thunder roared down from the heavens, matching the force of Ballander's thrust.

Rosalie never remembered what she had done.

At the last, with no thought of her own safety,

she flung herself forward, lashed wrists and all, and fell across the Count's body, to shield him from the death blow.

The stake was jostled aside, the Count shouted, and the short but heavy mallet crashed fully into Rosalie's left shoulder, sending jagged shock waves of agony down her shoulder and arm.

Nightmare closed over her in mountainous waves and seas of darkness.

The darkness was only temporary, induced by the almost paralyzing waves of agony coursing down her side. She tried to right herself, conscious of the mute amazement on the fact of Count Darkus. Ballander was shouting, calling to his men to get some water and to untie the schoolmistress. His savagery and passion had already received another thrust that undermined its conviction that Count Alexander Darkus was a bloody vampire. If he was one, why would this mortal woman, this pretty slip of a schoolmistress, sacrifice her own life to save him?

Midst all the shouting and the uproar while rough hands attended to her, Rosalie had eyes only for Count Darkus. Their gazes met, and she read in his eyes the message she wanted to know. The great soul and heart of Darkus were in his

glance. As brutal as the agony of her side was, with veritable hellfires of pain traveling throughout, Rosalie flushed, her heart soaring.

He loved her! She knew he did—as she loved him. With all her heart and every fiber of her being. It didn't matter that he was married to Lady Carmela; their love was pure and untarnished. They might never kiss; they might not even touch hands again—but he loved her! And that transcended all mortal considerations.

"Damn fool!" Ballander was bellowing. "Broke your shoulder bone! What were you trying to do, save this monster?"

"He's not a monster," she whispered fiercely. "He's a man. The finest I have ever known. And if you all weren't so blind with hate, you'd see that—" She had to stop, biting her teeth against the pain. The Larkmore men, almost shame-faced and twice as bewildered as Ballander, looked to him for guidance. Did they mean to go on and kill the vampire, or did they have to fuss with this troublesome schoolmistress?

Ballander was in a state, perspiring freely, watching one of the men tend to Rosalie's shoulder while another poured a glass of claret for her. The wine buoyed her, tasting strong and fiery. Lady Darkus was moaning now, while Mondro could

only stare at Rosalie, his face radiant with her sacrifice. As for Count Darkus, he had craned his head erect, unable to speak, but it was obvious he was filled with gratitude.

Ballander growled, "Darkus, this young lady was willing to die for you. That means something. Now if you'll keep in mind that I still am not convinced—"

"Then who am I to convince you, Mr. Ballander?"

"Burn me, Darkus! Defend yourself! Haven't you anything to say?"

"I have said all there is to say. I am not a vampire, and I know nothing of missing women. I think that Miss Lindquist spoke more eloquently for me than anything anyone could say."

"And so she did," Ballander agreed warmly. He whirled on his men, stake and mallet temporarily forgotten. "Let's search this place from barn to rafters. If they're here, we'll find them. If not, we can decide then what to do."

"Thank God," Rosalie murmured, forgetting the pain of her shoulder. The bone, happily, was not broken, but she would have a bruise that would stay with her a long time. Her arm hung limply at her side, nerveless, tingling with pain. It had begun to throb fearsomely, but she no longer cared. Dar-

kus was saved, if only momentarily. And there was a God and hope in the world after all. Hope *for* the world.

The villagers grumblingly moved out of the study, fanning out, searching, running up the stone staircase. Soon they could be heard moving overhead, their hobnailed boots clumping on the floorboards. And still, the storm outside raged.

The darkness coming on was like pitch. Black and solid as a void. An abyss of emptiness and loneliness.

"Those women," Ballander muttered, half to himself. "If they are here, Darkus . . ." He said no more, measuring the tip of his pointed stake. "You fiends . . ."

"Call us what you will, Mr. Ballander, but you are in error, I assure you."

Lady Darkus suddenly spoke up from her side of the room. She had seen Rosalie's attempted sacrifice, and as troubled as her thoughts might have been, she understood.

"She saved your life, Alexander. Now why would she do that?"

Count Darkus's voice seemed to come from great depths of ruefullness.

"She is a brave young woman, Carmela. And rather a romantic fool, I think."

"Does she love you, Alexander, do you think?"

The astounding query was softly uttered, without malice or condemnation. A great weariness filled the Lady's voice.

"Carmela! This is not the time or the place to discuss such matters. Rest easy, my dear. This will all pass soon enough, and you can return to your room and your pleasant dreams."

Lady Carmela Darkus laughed. A bitter, amused laugh.

"But she must love you very much to have nearly died for you! What a mockery it all is. The schoolmistress from America and the proud Count Alexander Darkus."

As taut as the situation was, with the men clumping about overhead in their search for the missing girls, the words of the Count's wife hung like tiny, separate, glittering jewels in the atmosphere of the room.

"Forgive my wife, Miss Lindquist," the Count said after a pause. "She is high-strung, as you well know. This nasty business has made her forget her manners."

Rosalie tried to smile, a smile she did not feel. "I understand, Count. Really, no apology is needed."

The bold eyes of Darkus's wife flashed, moving from Rosalie to the man lying captive on the great oaken table.

"You think to deceive me, do you? Both of you! When I saw all the time how she looked at you and you at her! Love has come to Darkus Castle, has it? Oh, the humor of the thing. Have you dared tell her, Alexander? About us? Our secret—the terrible one? Surely it will make Miss Lindquist very happy to know that secret. Shall I tell her—*now?*"

"Secret?" Ballander stiffened, the occult word hitting him at the very root of his suspicious nature. "Yes, Lady Darkus? You know something about this vampire talk? Out with it now—what is it you know?

Count Darkus tried to roll on the table. He could not. The leather lashings held him secure.

"She knows nothing," he said loudly, his voice rising in fear and anger. "Can't you see she is not herself? That you have undone her with this fiasco of vandalizing our home with your threats and absurd accusations?"

Lady Darkus lapsed into laughter. Fierce, shrill merriment. Her eyes danced, her bosom heaved, and she cackled with none of that superior dignity which was rightfully her own.

Rosalie's heart went out to the poor woman. The dreadful events of the night had indeed proved too much for Lady Carmela Darkus. She sounded like an insane creature.

For a moment, Ballander wavered again. His lower lip jutted angrily but thoughtfully. He raised a thick hand, calling for Lady Darkus to be silent.

Rosalie, certain her cheeks were flaming from the bold directness of her hostess's words, was glad for the interruption. She couldn't bear for her feelings for the lord of Darkus Castle to be discussed so broadly and openly. It wasn't right. Almost profane.

Mondro was silent in his chair, his slitted eyes reading lips and measuring the words that issued from them.

Once more that night, the brief silence was broken by a hoarse shout. This came from the direction of the main hallway. All eyes now swung toward the door. No one was quite prepared for the sight that now greeted them. Ballander, for all his mighty size and stolidity, appeared as meek and humble as any poor soul lost for the means of a livelihood.

The men of Larkmore filled the doorway, triumphant, smiling, still growling, however. Before them, in various postures and attitudes of fear and self-consciousness, stood three young women. Each had on identical, loose-fitting robes like togas. Each was blonde and pretty, and all were obviously teenagers. They all looked unharmed, radiant with good health and, save for extreme

embarrassment, not in the least bit unnerved in any way. Yet their immaturity clung to them like a shroud.

"Good God!" Ballander cried. "Where did you find them?"

"In the barn out back," came the amazed reply. "Hiding in the barn lofts, like three little mice. Oh, there's a lot to be explained here, Bill Ballander. God's truth to that!

One of the young girls, a long-haired blonde with many freckles, had begun to sob. "Oh, please," she whimpered in a low-pitched tremolo. "We didn't mean any harm. . . ."

"It was all a game," the girl next to her blurted quickly. "A chance to see the country. After all—"

Ballander held up a hand for silence, still unable to think clearly. Now that it was apparent that the girls had been in the castle giving the lie to the Count, he experienced no sense of victory or satisfaction. For it was equally plain that the three missing Larkmore girls had nothing to report or complain about. It was all so mystifying. He wanted to curse out loud, but he couldn't. He was trapped in a quandry of his own making.

Rosalie looked on. Count Darkus had subsided against his bonds on the oaken table. Lady Darkus was regarding the tips of her fingers as incredibly unconcerned as a woman in her state of mind

could be. Mondro remained as ever. Mute, expressionless.

"Maybe," Ballander said grimly, "you young ones will please tell us what this is all about. If this man here harmed you or led you astray, we want to know it. Tell the truth now. There's nothing to fear. You are safe now. Yes, Velhie?"

"Wandra," exclaimed the man who was hugging the freckled girl, his eyes at once tearful and angry. "Lady Darkus has your cameo. Grandmother's cameo! How can that be?"

Wandra looked sheepish. "I gave it to her, Father."

"Gave it to her?" He was incredulous, as were his fellow townspeople. "A stranger and you gave her such a gift as the cameo? Why, in God's name?"

Wandra tilted her chin, on the defensive. Her blue eyes glinted. "She was good to us. And kind. That's why—"

Rosalie interrupted. "Mr. Ballander. Here are the girls, and they seem to be well. Before we hear the rest of this account, don't you think it proper that you untie us all? No matter what little Wandra may tell us, I don't think it will involve that which you feared the most. Don't you agree?"

Ballander once more fought with himself. And lost. Turning, he nodded, ordering his men to do

as Rosalie had asked. "Tell your giant what this is all about, Darkus," Ballander said pointedly. "We've had enough fighting for one night, I think."

The three girls glanced at each other self-consciously, then lowered their eyes. They were dangerously close to a seige of giggling, despite the impending danger of receiving punishment at the hands of parents, worried to distraction. Rosalie could see this. Even in America, the spectacle of mischievous children causing so much grief was not a novelty. Like Mr. Mark Train's adventurous but foolish heroes Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, who attended their own funeral services. Still, the terror of the night had not completely vanished. The storm still beat down on the overhead rooftop, these men still had clubs and stakes and mallets. It all so depended on what these Larkmore girls would have to say. And reveál.

Should they condemn the Darkus family . . .

"Well," Ballander said, eyeing the cause of all the trouble, "out with it now. And no lies. What are you all doing here, and how did you get out of Larkmore?"

Count Darkus, shirt torn, face bloodied, took up a position at Rosalie's side. His hand steadied

her, closed about her good shoulder. He had signalled Mondro with his sign language what to do, and the giant had stationed himself at Lady Carmela's side. The dark lovely wife of the Count was still staring abstractly at her fingers as if she thought they might not be fingers at all.

The girls' names were Wandra Velhie, Tania Halleck, and Zelda Lappin. Wandra proved to be the spokesman for all. With the men of the village and the people of Darkus Castle eager for her words, the young woman seemed to revel in the spotlight of importance. She took her time in explaining all that had happened since the day before last, when she, Tania, and Zelda had decided to run away from Larkmore and see for themselves what was out there in the world beyond the hills and valleys.

Ballander pushed back his slouch hat and glowered. "Are you telling us all that you just ran away? That no one forced you to go? You were not kidnapped or taken by force?"

Wandra pulled nervously at her long, loose hair, As blatant and carefree as she was, she was not deaf to the ominous rumblings of the men who had scoured the countryside in the rain and storm for her and her friends, leaving hearth and kin to do so.

"No—we ran away. We wanted to. We wanted to see things. Do things. Everything is so . . . much the same in Larkmore."

Ballander's irritation was poorly concealed. He poked a burly forefinger at the girls. His face was so angry and mean in appearance that the girls recoiled.

"You young idiots!" Ballander raged. "Do you know what you've caused? We've all been half out of heads from worrying about you three! Your mothers, God bless 'em, have been sick at heart what with talk of vampires and maybe accidents and God knows what else. God help us, tonight we nearly committed a great mistake. We were going to kill these people because we thought that they had caught you and were doing their devil's own work on you. As my everlasting soul is in danger right now, I'll not forgive you. Shame on you. You, Tania Halleck, and you, Zelda Lappin. And you, Wandra Velhie—you might have made murderers out of all of us!"

Tania and Zelda gave vent to their pent-up emotions. They began to blubber and whimper, their tears and voices blending. But Wandra was made of sterner stuff. She thrust her head back defiantly, her little chin daring Mr. Ballander to slap her.

"Well," she said in a voice she managed to keep even and controlled. "We're alive and well,

aren't we? And what was so terrible about wanting a holiday? Don't we work from morning until nightfall all our lives, milking cows, pulling weeds, helping with the livestock? You don't understand. It's easy for you. You're all men. We're just womenfolk. Like the cattle. No one really notices us!" Tears formed in her eyes. "As for that vampire talk—what of it? Who believes in those fairy tales? But if you'll feel better knowing—I'll tell you!"

"Tell us what?" Ballander echoed, his skepticism as high as the mountains overlooking the Karlopian Pass.

For answer, Wandra Velhie pointed a slender, graceful finger at Lady Carmela Darkus. "About her. *She's a vampire.* I know because she sucked our blood. Last night. In the barn. There. Now do you believe me?"

Wandra Velhie got it all out in a rush, cheeks flushed, her eyes flashing. Lady Carmela Darkus stared back at her, lips drawn back, hands raised like talons.

The room held its arrangement for only a moment longer.

With one simple statement, the blonde girl had turned the world upside-down again.

A TALE OF TERROR

Rosalie Lindquist once more experienced an acute sensation of being disembodied. It was as if her form hovered above the motley assemblage in the great hall of Darkus Castle. The crushing revelation of Wandra Velhie, as she accused Lady Carmela Darkus of being a vampire, had fallen like a thunderbolt over the group. Again, the cries and curses of the angry Larkmore men raised in a threatening chorus. Again, Ballander called for silence and order, glaring at Count Darkus before he redirected his attention to the three cowering girls. Only the simple fact that these young women were unharmed had prevented Ballander's followers from rushing forward *en masse* to conclude the terrible punishment that Ballander himself had suggested.

Count Darkus, disheveled and still regally im-

perious, shrugged his wide shoulders in a gesture of despair. For one long moment, he seemed to yield to some inner despair. As though he had borne some great weight for years and now the burden was impossible to hold any longer. He was like some world-weary Atlas, ready to drop the earth from his shoulders.

Rosalie's heart went out to him, most especially to the abject, pitiful figure of his wife. Lady Carmela, upon the termination of Wandra Velhie's words, had assumed a posture of pitiful defiance. She was shaking, her hands still upraised like claws, her lips in a fierce withdrawal that revealed her exquisite teeth. To the incredulous villagers surrounding her, she must have seemed a vampire incarnate. The young women, shivering with fear now, huddled together. Wandra Velhie's father, the doughty man, clenched a fist and shook it in Lady Darkus's face.

"Blood sucker!" he said shrilly. "If you've harmed these girls, you'll pay for it. I swear it on my mother's grave!"

Ballander stepped between him and his target. Ballander, who had acquired a lesson in discipline and forbearance somewhere during the assorted madness of the day. "Hold off, Velhie. Let's hear the girl out. The Lady has her rights too. There's more here than just words."

"Aye," Velhie rumbled. "Find the truth. I'm all for that, Bill Ballander." His remark was followed by more voiced assents and mutterings of approval.

"Wandra," Ballander said quietly, "rest easy. Take your time. But you must tell us all that happened since you came to this place. All of it. It is very important that you leave nothing out. The lives of all these people are at stake."

Wandra Velhie nodded, coming forward, staring around at the men. Tania and Zelda sniffled, watching their friend. The long-haired blonde girl brushed a tear from her eye.

The endless thunder that rumbled over Darkus Castle had finally lessened to a dull, distant roar. The dampened stones and mortar of the structure now held an encompassing moisture and clamminess despite the blaze of torches and candlelight.

Count Darkus raised his head to look at Wandra Velhie. He did not look at Rosalie or his wife or Mondro. All of his keen attention was focused on a young woman whose mind and intelligence held the key to life and death.

"Go on, girl," Ballander urged quietly but forcefully. "We are listening. The floor is yours."

Wandra, trying to hold back the tears, told her story. There was no need to decide whether she was elaborating or embellishing the details. Those

spoke for themselves, with all the eloquence of the loneliness and mystery that had provoked them in the first place.

Rosalie, listening, could only marvel anew at the workings of God and the human heart and mind.

Wandra's tale was heartbreakingly simple. A few days ago, she and her two friends, Tania and Zelda, weary of the drudgery of Larkmore life, had decided to run away. They had taken to the hills, following the curving length of the Karlopian Pass.

In short order, on foot and using the streams that followed the Pass, they had come upon Darkus Castle in the dead of night. A great storm was raging, drowning the roadway and the Pass. Frightened and soaked to the skin, the girls had managed to find their way into the huge, ramshackle Darkus barn.

They had found a refuge from the storm. There was warm hay, a chance to rest, a time to think and make plans.

Lady Darkus, in the very middle of the night, at the height of the storm, had come upon them. As terrified as the girls were, it was obvious to them that the beautiful lady was not mentally well. Larkmore was a poor village, and the three girls were no strangers to the spectacle of drink-besotted men, imbecilic boys, and deranged persons.

Since they had grown up with this sort of aberration, they were not as terrified as they might have been. Indeed, Lady Darkus was as docile and gentle as a little girl. She suggested that the girls stay in the barn as long as they liked and she, Lady Darkus, would provide food and drink, as well as fresh wearing apparel.

The girls readily agreed, since this fitted in with their plans. What did it matter if the lovely lady was a bit "strange"? She was "very kind." That was all that mattered to youngsters eager to be let alone as they searched the road for adventure.

Then came the strange game the Lady insisted they must play with her to earn their keep. She would bring them fine silken togas, which they must put on. And they must allow her to stalk them as she pretended to be a woman whose blood was tainted with the curse of vampirism. Tania and Zelda had recoiled from this, shrinking in their fright. But Wandra, made of far sterner stuff and quick to recognize a golden opportunity, argued her friends into compliance. After all, if the strange wife of Count Darkus wanted to play games, what harm was there in it? In the end, they could probably ask her for some gold coins before they resumed their journey. Cowed by Wandra's superior strength of mind and will, Tania and Zelda yielded.

They put on the togas, such fine garments, and moved about as Lady Darkus suggested. When she stalked them, hands upraised like a sleep-walker, and then went through the motions of kissing their slim, white necks, they meekly allowed the indecent act. Tania later complained that the Lady had bitten her slightly, but Wandra hushed her. Tania mustn't spoil a "good thing." Wandra, to show Lady Darkus how friendly the feelings of herself and her friends were, had given her the cameo brooch as a token of esteem. Lady Darkus had admired it so, almost crying at sight of the piece, that Wandra deemed it politic to do so.

In the end, when Lady Darkus withdrew to the castle, the three girls had burst into giggles over the amusing game they had played with "Lady Queer."

"Isn't she a looney!" Tania had exclaimed.

"Yes," Wandra had said wisely. "The poor thing so beautiful, all her wealth. Thinks she's a vampire. It's so silly, isn't it?"

So the deadly charade had continued, with the vampire act replayed and a long walk in the gardens and courtyards of Darkus Castle in the dead of night. Lady Darkus would appear, bringing food and drink, and then fly back to the house when all was done.

There was no more to add to the tale. The vil-

lagers scouring the Castle on this very night had come upon three girls hiding in the lofts of the big barn. They had heard all the commotion of the arrival of the men and had realized that they were the cause of the disturbance. Again, like the children they really still were, they had hidden themselves from the parental wrath they were bound to expect.

"Is that all of it, Wandra?" Bill Ballander boomed in a big voice when the girl was done. "The whole truth?"

"Yes, Mr. Ballander. So help me God."

"So help you God?" Ballander sneered. "It's devil's work you've done, young missy. These people could have been killed on your account."

Wandra's father gawked at Ballander. "What are you saying? You heard the child. This woman's a vampire. Sucking throats, bleeding the young . . ."

Ballander shook his head sorrowfully. "Vampires, Benjamin? I doubt that. This poor woman is queer in the head, and that's the all of it. We know vampires, don't we? They don't show in a mirror and they can't be abroad in the daylight. Well, you want your proof—look for yourself. See Darkus. See where he stands. Now what do you say?"

All eyes swung toward the Count. He was standing, deep in gloom and thought, looking at Wandra

Velhie. Behind him, a small oval mirror on the wall, solid in a golden frame, revealed his profile. Dim and distant but his reflection all the same.

"The woman," Ballander said. "Stand her before the glass and see with your own eyes if she is what you think she is. Go ahead. Do it now. We've acted like fools long enough for my thinking."

At the word, hands seized Lady Darkus and propelled her toward the oval mirror. She didn't fight back. In an instant, her lovely, pale face was staring back at the woman who stood before her. There was a muttered oath from one of the men. Another openly made the sign of the cross. "Merciful God," another whispered. "We could have had their blood on our hands all because of these silly girls. . . ."

"Gentlemen," Count Darkus said suddenly, his voice a pained and wounded thing, "if you are done with your business here, I would like you to withdraw."

Ballander nodded, shaking his head at the men.

"Darkus, God help you. Your woman is vampire-tainted. Touched in her thinking. I wish you well with her. I can apologize for what happened here this night, but I don't need your pardon. We did what we had to do. And we weren't that far wrong, were we?"

"No," Count Darkus said coldly. "You were

not. But you were guilty of acting without thinking. Of coming into my home and mistreating myself, my wife, and my guest. And Mondro. Faithful, dumb Mondro. I ask you again to leave. There is little else to say."

"Count." Rosalie raised her voice. "They will go. They have made you suffer enough. And these girls—I would strongly recommend that their own parents deal with them."

Ballander lifted his big hands helplessly. "You leave that to us. Goodbye, Darkus. We'll be going. But as one man to another, let me tell you. Get that woman to a doctor, before she costs you everything you own."

Lady Darkus laughed. A long, trilling, mocking laugh. Count Darkus swung toward her. "Carmela, please, that is enough. These men will be out of the house soon. Control yourself."

"Control myself?" She flung the words back at him. Her head tossed. And her right arm, hidden behind her back, came up into view. Somehow, Lord only knew, she had managed to find one of the Count's long dueling pistols, where it had lain unnoticed on the stone floor. The Count halted, checked in movement. He kept very still. Rosalie and the rest of the people in the room gaped.

"Carmela. Put down that gun."

"No, Alexander. There is nothing left."

"Carmela." He took a careful step forward. "Please, my dear. Don't let this upset you—"

Again, she laughed, raising the pistol to her head. Its nose was pressed against her brow. Her mocking laughter flowed over the still-as-death room.

"There is nothing left, Alexander. I'm a curse on you. A plague. The young people laugh. Miss Lindquist is sorry for me. Mondro cannot speak. I made him intoxicated today, hoping he would harm Miss Lindquist, for I knew you loved her. Very well. I'm ashamed of myself. I have brought you nothing but grief these last years. There is only one way to relieve you of that necessity.

Count Darkus took one more step. "Carmela. Put down that gun."

"Goodbye, Alexander. Forgive me, Miss Lindquist. I do envy you. He is the finest man of all."

The finality of her voice sped Count Darkus into sudden action. He seemed to leave his boots, hurling himself across the distance of floor that separated him from Lady Darkus.

But he was not near enough to her to have prevented what followed.

Lady Darkus smiled obliquely—the expression flitted over her sadly beautiful face as a cloud hides

the sun for only a second—and she pressed the trigger of the dueling pistol. Rosalie spun her head so that she might not see. There was a puff of flame and powder, a short, bombastic explosion of sound. And Lady Carmela Darkus, limp and lifeless, slid to the stone floor, her hand still closed about the pistol.

Count Darkus caught her before she fell and buried his face against her bosom. Lazy tendrils of gunsmoke wafted up from the center of the room.

There was no hope for a pistol wound received at such close distance. Darkus's last gesture was one merely of despair and futility. The dead woman in his arms was like a cross—the one he had had to bear for so many years.

Lady Darkus, poor, sick woman, was dead. Her agonies and miseries were over.

The assemblage in that hall, to a man, removed their hats and held them across their hearts. The three young girls, shocked speechless by the enormity of this new horror, could only look on with mouths agape.

"Leave me," Count Alexander Darkus said with great dignity from the muffled recesses of the dead woman in his arms. "Leave Darkus to bury his dead in peace."

There was no one in that room to give him any argument about that. The mystery, the weirdness, the suppositions about Darkus Castle were ended, for all time.

Only the legend would live on.

POSTSCRIPT

May 13, 1899

My very dear Father Luigi,

I take pen in hand once more to advise you of something new that has occurred. I feel that sufficient time has elasped now for you to have read my journal about Darkus Castle. Not having heard from you, again I can only guess as to what your true feelings and thoughts may be. Nevertheless, even with your silence, I must relate to you the fresher developments of the day.

Nearly two weeks have passed since I last wrote you, so I can wait no longer. It is inadvisable to jeopardize your plans and my own by keeping you in the dark as to what I have done. I can only sincerely hope you will approve. Even with a new life or a fresh perspective, I cannot leave out of

my mind and heart all that I love and cherish in you, Father.

Trust me. Trust my faith in God and your Holy Bible. Remember me in your prayers and devotionals as one who will always believe in the Lord and the hereafter.

Yet, I must tell you the remainder of the story of Count Alexander Darkus. It is still so incredible in my mind that even now putting the words (and the facts) on paper hardly lessens my awe and disbelief.

Following the unfortunate suicide of Lady Carmela, I felt it my duty to stay on at the Castle to assist the Count in any way I could. When the pitifully ignorant people of Larkmore had left the premises, taking with them those three horrible children who had caused so much grief and tragedy I felt I should try to help the Count resettle himself for the ordeal to come. How little I know of men and life! I, who meant to be helpful, was only intrusive. I was like some unwanted stranger trespassing on private property. I confess I chose to stay because I had experienced a love for the Count, a love I felt he shared.

How shameless you must have thought of me, reading the journal! I, a professed Christian, holding a physical love for a man I knew to be married. And yet, Father Luigi, in all honesty, I did not

feel sinful or ashamed. I would have kept my place, remained silent, and said not a word about my true feelings, if everything had gone along quietly without incident. I would have left Darkus Castle, continued my journey, and thought no more than rueful thoughts about a wonderful man I had met. In time, I was certain, this love would pass. I thought it was an experience that would help me grow, mature, as it were.

How little any of us know about the human heart! Especially one's own.

Mondro, of course, was there to help the Count through his difficult time. Faithful Mondro—you should have seen the mute appeal in his face and hands as he sought to beg my pardon for the terrible encounter in the hallway. He had no tolerance for wines and liquors, and poor Lady Darkus had known of that failing. I assured Mondro, with some suitable gestures, that Count Darkus had explained to me and that I understood and held no hard feelings.

Larkmore will not trouble Darkus Castle any longer. The sun shines here now, in both a physical and mental way. As run-down and dilapidated as the castle is, there is a new aura of brightness about the old building.

But—my confession. I'm coming to that.

It was in the great hall on the second day after

the Larkmore incident that Count Darkus told me the truth about Carmela Darkus. A truth that was like a dream come true. Remember the children and their faces at Christmastime? Well, I have had my Christmas gift for all of my life. Indeed, even as I sit here now and write of it, I can still scarcely credit my senses. If only everyone could have his wildest dreams and fancies come true, as mine did, how happy a place the world would be!

You see, Father Luigi, Count Darkus explained to me that the Lady Carmela was *not really* his wife. She was the wife of the Count's brother, one Nicolai Darkus, who had unfortunately drowned on a boating expedition in the mountains. It seems the tragedy had so disturbed the Lady that she lost her senses. There was acute danger of her being placed in an institution for the mentally deranged. Count Darkus, to prevent such an act on the part of local authorities, pretended to marry her in a mock ceremony performed before high-placed friends of his who aided in the deception. In this fashion, protected by his name and rank, Lady Darkus would be safe until the day when she found herself again.

Alas, the road to doom is paved with good intentions, as you have said so often in your Sunday sermons. Lady Darkus's mind did not improve. If anything, the environs of Darkus Castle

made her worse. I can understand why. That rotting building, the dark roads, the tors of the Pass, the way the sun turns bloodred at sunset. It would be enough to torment a rational mind. You recall how my journal indicates the effect it had upon me? Yes, I can well understand Lady Darkus's uneasy mind.

So the cure never came. The Count helped as much he could, explaining her fear of crucifixes as he did and concocting all those lies about the cameo, which he of course knew nothing of. She had not even told him of her encounter with the three Larkmore girls. What was the poor man to do but go along with any lie she made on the spot?

He could not take me into his confidence. He didn't dare. Not with myself imagining that he was a married man. Gentlemen simply do not behave that way, and the Count, if he is anything at all, is a gentleman from crown to heel.

He has long had his difficulties with the peasants all around him. He is a much misunderstood man —which was why the men of Larkmore in their fear and ignorance sought him out as the root of their troubles. Laying the disappearance of those girls at his door. Do you realize the torments he has endured in a land as dark and as uneducated as this?

So there it is. The full truth.

I have chosen to remain on. To help this dark land, to build a new school, with the Count's assistance. To bring to these simple minds the light of knowledge and truth so that there will be no more talk of vampires or witches or picturesque monsters. We will help them burn the garlic amulets and the wolfbane and all that dreadful refuse of the superstitious mind. I think it God's work, and I hope you concur.

Count Darkus has asked me to marry him. I have said yes with all my heart. I am convinced in my mind that this is the way chosen for me. By life and by God. I have never been so happy in all my years on this earth.

Please write back as soon as possible and bless this union. If you will, and truly agree with my decision, then my happiness will indeed be complete.

I am to be Lady Darkus. I will be happy as such.

God bless you, dear Father Luigi.

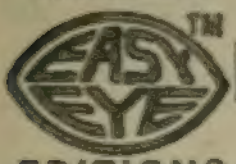
Your devoted friend and pupil,
Rosalie Lindquist

P.S. You are perhaps wondering what became of the bat I saw at my window that first night at

Darkus Castle. Well, he is no more. When I finally explained to Count Darkus that I had seen the filthy creature, the Count and Mondro went hunting for him. The Count brought him down with one superb shot of his hunting rifle.

He is, among many other attributes, a great huntsman.

LANCER



LARGER TYPE • NON-GLARE PAPER

EDITIONS

73-575	Clouds over Vellanti ..... *Elsie Lee*	.60
73-576	Nightmare in July ..... *Clara Coleman*	.60
73-603	The Moonflower ..... *Phyllis A. Whitney*	.60
73-604	Nurse in Nassau ..... *Rose Williams*	.60
73-605	Engraved in Evil ..... *Paula Minton*	.60
73-606	The Last of the Breed ..... *Don Rico*	.60
73-613	A Fear in Borzano ..... *Willa Jay*	.60
73-619	The Dragon's Lair ..... *Isabel D'Este Wenzell*	.60
73-622	Psychiatric Nurse ..... *Fern Shepard*	.60
73-623	In the Halls of Evil ..... *T. A. Waters*	.60
73-630	Golden Blood ..... *Jack Williamson*	.60
73-632	Opal Street ..... *June Wetherell*	.60
73-633	House of Hate ..... *Dorothy Fletcher*	.60
73-635	Lady of Battle Mountain .... *Matt Stuart*	.60
73-637	The Eagle's Nest ..... *Dorothy Daniels*	.60
73-640	Hangman's Country .... *Lewis B. Patten*	.60
73-645	Nurse in the Tropics ..... *Ann Gilmer*	.60

Continued on next page

73-649	**Nurse of Brooding Mansion** ..... *Paulette Warren*	.60
73-651	**Wyoming Gun Law** ..... *Lee Floren*	.60
74-872	**Don't Look behind You!** ..... *Samuel Rogers*	.75
74-873	**Suffer a Witch** ..... *Rae Foley*	.75
74-877	**Season of Evil** ..... *Jane Gordon*	.75
74-878	**The Devil of the Stairs** ..... *Pat Root*	.75
74-879	**The Templeton Memoirs** ..... *Dorothy Daniels*	.75
74-880	**Secret Melody** ..... *Paula Minton*	.75
74-881	**The Running Spy** ..... *Joseph Milton*	.75
74-882	**Fog Hides the Fury** ..... *Paula Minton*	.75
74-884	**Kindling** ..... *Nevil Shute*	.75
74-885	**Sybil** ..... *Louis Auchincloss*	.75
74-887	**Upbeat** .....*Irving Shulman*	.75
74-888	**The Career of David Noble** ..... *Frances Parkinson Keyes*	.75
74-889	**Catalina** ..... *W. Somerset Maugham*	.75
74-890	**Rose's Last Summer** .... *Margaret Millar*	.75

If these books are not available at your local newsstand send price indicated plus 10¢ to cover mailing costs. On orders of four or more books Lancer will pay the postage. For a complete free catalog write to LANCER BOOKS, INC., 1560 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10036.

Vampire?

For Rosalie Lindquist, a young schoolteacher from America, her sabbatical in Europe had been a truly rewarding experience. But when she was stranded in the Transylvanian Alps during a savage storm, her adventure turned to terror.

For Rosalie was rescued by the dark, sinister Count Darkus and taken to legend-shrouded Darkus Castle, where evil seemed to lurk in the flickering shadows and mystery was veiled in mystery. Darkus Castle, where there were no mirrors and the sight of Rosalie's crucifix inspired terror. . . .

Would Rosalie ever again see her native shores, her normal life—or was she to be forever trapped in the morass of evil forces that abounded in the countryside?

And was Count Darkus really a vampire?